

BIG LIES

BIG TROUBLE

Little Secrets

Lock
and
Key



EMILY BLAKE

Little Lock and Key Secrets

Little Sec



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Lock and Key

Point

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*To Jane Mason and Sarah Stephens,
two of Silver Spring's best-kept secrets*

Chapter One



“Get out!” Alison Rose glared at the smug expression on her cousin Kelly Reeves’s face. “Get out!” she hissed again. Alison may have been forced to move into Kelly’s house, but that didn’t give her cousin the right to barge into her bedroom in the middle of the night and snatch things out of her hand.

Standing, Alison tried to grab back the paper Kelly had yanked away. She’d only just found the birth certificate locked in the ornate Japanese box on the desk, and had barely had time to read the information it contained. The contents of the paper were so shocking, Alison felt desperate to look at it again — to read the unbelievable

words — but Kelly wouldn't have it. She took a step back and held it out of reach with one hand while waving Alison away like an annoying little mosquito with the other.

"Give it back," Alison said through clenched teeth.

"Don't rush me." Kelly stepped around Alison and lowered the document so it caught the circular pool of light cast by the small lamp on the desk. "I'm trying to read."

Alison squeezed her hands into fists behind her back. She wished she could send one of them smashing into Kelly's perfect, perky little nose. But that was sure to elicit a wail, which would wake up Aunt Phoebe, which would create a scene Alison just couldn't handle right now. She was still trying to process what she had read. She was not ready to share it any more than she had to. One Reeves in the know was a nightmare. Two would be a catastrophe.

Sinking down onto the bed, Alison felt the weight of the news fall on her like a ton of bricks. She was not an only child. Her mother had a son. And that son was Jeremy Jones. Son of the movie

mogul Harris Jones. Tutor to her best friend, Zoey. Her brother.

“Oh, my god,” Kelly said as she, too, comprehended the meaning of the birth certificate. She sat down, hard, in the chair by the desk. Her supercool demeanor had vanished. In its place was an almost-human look of surprise. “Oh, my god,” she said again. “Where did you get this?”

Without thinking, Alison pointed at the Japanese box on the dresser. She could not look at her cousin. Her jaw was clenched so tight, it was making her head hurt. But that pain was nothing compared to the pain of finding out about yet another lie she’d been told by her family.

Lies upon lies upon lies! They filled Alison with fury. No wonder she had stolen documents from her grandmother and then lied about it to practically everyone. No wonder she had lied in court and helped send her mother to jail. Lying was the Diamond family specialty, an ancestral art form.

Except that Alison was finished. The lying was over, effective immediately. Standing once

more, Alison snatched back the official-looking paper. "I'd like you to leave," she told her cousin in an icy tone.

"Jeez, Al, that's some pretty heavy stuff. Are you sure you don't want to talk?"

"To *you*?" Alison snorted. "You think I trust *you*?"

"Of course not." Kelly flipped her long blond hair. Even after sleeping on it half the night it was untangled and shiny. "But I'm the only one here."

"So I should just pour out my deep dark secrets and fears . . . why? So I can see them plastered all over school on Monday? No, thanks." Alison shook back her own, shorter brown hair. She stared at her cousin with frosty blue eyes and waited for her to stand up and go.

"This isn't just about you, Al," Kelly said indignantly. "Jeremy isn't just your brother, he's *my* cousin." Her mouth puckered into a pout as she inspected the ends of her hair for splits.

"Oh, how traumatic for you," Alison replied sarcastically. Kelly had the amazing ability to make everything about her. But having a secret cousin did not compare to having a

secret brother. It was not even close. Alison's mother had had another husband! Another child! For all Alison knew, her mom could have had a whole other life. And for fifteen years she hadn't breathed a word of it to Alison, her only daughter. This was proof that her mom had been lying to her since the moment she was born. It was confirmation of her suspicions that her whole life was built on deception — a foundation of secrets and lies.

"Yeah, I guess it's not quite the same thing," Kelly said thoughtfully. Alison looked at her cousin a little more closely. She was acting strangely — too human to be the Kelly that Alison knew. She seemed more like her *old* cousin Kelly, the one who'd been her friend before she ground Alison into the dirt.

Kelly must have noticed Alison squinting at her dubiously. "Believe it or not, Alison, I know how it feels when your parents lie to you. When I found out that Aunt Christine was actually my mom, and that she gave me up, well . . ." She looked up at Alison. "It hurt."

A geyser of emotions bubbled up inside Alison and she felt her face flush. It was so

strange, and strangely welcome, to receive a little empathy — especially from Kelly. Perhaps she was not impervious to pain after all.

“But don’t worry, you’ll get over it,” Kelly added.

“Right.” Alison closed her eyes for a second. That was the familiar Kelly — skin as thick as a rhinoceros. “Let’s not tell anyone about this new development,” Alison said, trying to sound casual. “It’ll be our little secret.”

“All right,” Kelly agreed with a shrug.

“Good. Now get out.” Alison held the door open wide. As grateful as she was that Kelly wasn’t being horrible, she wanted to be alone.

She had a call to make. In private.

Chapter Two



“Hullo?” Zoey Ramirez’s already low voice sounded even lower when roused from sleep in the wee hours of the morning.

“Zoey, it’s me,” Alison said softly. She had listened carefully until she’d heard Kelly’s door click shut, but wanted to keep it down in case Kelly was eavesdropping through the wall. Even after the almost warm and fuzzy moment they just shared, and her promise to keep the info a secret, there was still no trusting her.

“Alison? What’s wrong?” Zoey asked, the grogginess going out of her voice. “What is it?”

"I can tell you all about it tomorrow," Alison said anxiously. "Right now I just need one thing."

"What?"

"Jeremy's number."

"Jeremy's number? You woke me up in the middle of the night for Jeremy's number?" Zoey sounded half amused and half annoyed.

"Uh, yeah. I guess I did," Alison admitted. "And I promise I'll tell you everything tomorrow. I just really need that number right now."

"Okaaaay," Zoey said, before rattling off the digits from memory. "But I still think it's rude to wake someone from a fabulous dream without telling them why."

She was right, of course. But Alison didn't have the energy to get into it right now. It was a long story. She was already exhausted, and she hadn't even spoken to Jeremy yet. Still, this was Zoey, her best friend, the one person she trusted. Alison took a deep breath. "I need to talk to him because . . . he's my brother." Alison felt a shiver go up her spine at the sound of the words.

"Your *what*?" Zoey gasped.

"I just found Jeremy's birth certificate and it has my mom's name on it. I guess Mom was

married before she had me, and she had a son,” Alison said abruptly. She really didn’t want to hash this out right now. What she wanted was to get off the phone so she could call Jeremy.

“Your mom was married to Harris Jones? Whoa.”

“Yeah. Whoa,” Alison agreed, biting at her nail.

“Does anyone else know?” Zoey asked.

“I don’t know,” Alison said. “I think Jeremy. And my mom and Harris, obviously. Oh, and Kelly.”

“You told Kelly?” Zoey practically screeched.

“I didn’t *tell* her,” Alison said defensively. “She found out. And she’s actually being pretty decent about it.”

“Decent? Kelly? You have got to be kidding.”

Maybe it was the hour, or the tone of Zoey’s voice, or just the shock of the whole crazy night, but Alison felt herself getting annoyed. “Kelly isn’t the problem here,” Alison said shortly. “Your tutor is.”

“Why is Jeremy a problem?” Zoey asked. “He didn’t pick his — your — mom on purpose.”

“He’s been lying, Zoey. He’s been lying to me ever since I met him.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Zoey objected. “Have you even talked to him yet?”

“That’s why I called you, remember? To get his number.” Alison didn’t bother to keep the annoyance out of her voice. She couldn’t believe Zoey was taking Jeremy’s side in all of this. So what if Zoey had a king-size crush on the guy. He was a liar, just like the rest of them! And he was lying to more people than just her. “You know, you should be mad at him, too. He’s been using you just to get to my family and me. It’s not like you *need* a tutor.”

There was a tense silence.

“Yeah, right.” Zoey’s tone was frosty and derisive when she finally spoke. “It would be impossible for him to stick around because he actually *likes* me. It’s all about *you* and your superimportant family. The rest of us are just here to make you look good, right?” Zoey snarled.

Stung, Alison said nothing. She could picture her best friend’s angry face, her dark, narrowed eyes peering out from under her long streaked bangs, the near sneer on her lips. If Zoey had learned anything during her years at boarding school, it was how to fight dirty.

And she was on a roll. “I really didn’t think living under the same roof as Kelly would change you this quickly. You’re turning right back into her clone,” Zoey said cruelly.

“I’ve never been her clone!” Alison snapped, raising her voice. “You know I’m not like her. You just don’t get it.” She was practically yelling. She didn’t care who heard her anymore. “You don’t know what it’s like to have a mother who does nothing but lie to you.”

“You’re right. I don’t know what it’s like to have a mother — at all.”

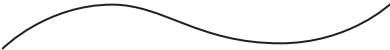
Alison’s stomach lurched. Zoey’s mom had died a few years ago, under horrible circumstances. Zoey was still tormented by her death, and Alison would never intentionally use it as ammunition. But Zoey didn’t give Alison a chance to apologize.

“I just wish I knew what it was like to have a real friend,” Zoey said. Another zinger.

“Here’s a hint,” Alison said, lowering her voice again. “First you have to be one.”

Without another word, Alison hung up the phone.

Chapter Three



Kelly walked into CocoLa, her new favorite chocolate café, and took a long look around before removing her oversize sunglasses. Chad wasn't there yet, just the usual Sunday crowd getting their fix of caffeine, sugar, and butter fat.

When every eye in the place was on her, Kelly slunk like a cat over to the best table, took off her puffy white parka, tossed it on an empty chair, and seated herself in another one. Then she took a deep breath and settled back to wait for her guy.

The hip hangout looked as delectable as it smelled, with cocoa-colored walls and large, modern tile floors in various shades of brown

and beige. The robin's-egg-blue and red accents on the windows and confection-filled counter added just the right tasteful touches to brighten it up and make it feel a little bit French. And Kelly, dressed in white jeans and a white high-neck, ruffled blouse with a white belt over it, was like a bright spot of nougat in the center of a dark chocolate universe.

Despite knowing how fabulous she looked, Kelly felt a tad unsettled. She'd been elated when Chad had called and asked to meet. It had been a long time since they had been out in public together. In fact, this would be the first time since Chad had woken up from his coma. And the first time since Kelly had decided she truly was in love with Alison's ex. Chad's brother Dustin's late-night call on Saturday was more than a little disturbing. Kelly tensed thinking about Dustin's claim that Chad had suddenly remembered that he was really in love with Alison — and that he was going to dump Kelly like trash. It was far-fetched, to be sure. Who in his right mind would choose Alison over her? So why, Kelly wondered, did she feel an annoying kernel of doubt in the pit of her stomach?

Of course, Chad had not exactly been in his right mind lately. He was still recovering from his coma-induced amnesia. And he had not even begun to battle the Hodgkin's lymphoma that was at the root of his troubles. The boy was in bad shape. It was not improbable to think he might say or do something crazy. It was a relief to hear he wanted to get together — it sounded like things were getting back to normal. Unless . . .

At first Kelly had offered to go to Chad's house to see him. He was weak, and she wanted to make their visit as smooth as possible. But when he said he wanted to get out, she was glad. Out was neutral territory, definitely better. He would never break up with her in public. Not that he was going to break up with her at all . . .

When the large entrance to the café opened again, Chad blew in with a gust of chilly air. Kelly's pulse quickened. Though he'd lost quite a bit of weight in the hospital, the color was back in his cheeks. His curls had been tousled by the wind, his brown eyes were shining, and he looked better than he had in a long time. Maybe even better than chocolate.

“Hey,” Chad greeted her as he loped to the table where Kelly was waiting. He bent over and kissed her cheek before moving her parka and sitting down across from her. “Hope you weren’t waiting long. My mom didn’t think I should go out in the cold.” He sounded a little winded.

“Not too long.” Kelly smiled, trying to catch Chad’s eye. He hadn’t looked her in the face since he walked in. And now, unwinding his knit scarf from around his neck, he was looking at the floor. Something *was* up. As the waiter approached the table, Kelly decided to chalk Chad’s behavior up to nerves. After all, he was starting his chemotherapy this week and it sounded pretty nasty.

“What can I get you two?” the young waiter asked. He said “two,” but his eyes were resting solely on Kelly. He didn’t even take his gaze off her face to write things down. *This is more like it*, Kelly thought. She was used to this kind of attention. So why wasn’t she getting it from her boyfriend?

When their order was in, Kelly leaned across the small round table and grabbed Chad’s hand. “Now tell me what I can get for *you*.” She looked

intently into Chad's face. He couldn't avoid her gaze now, and she felt him studying her green eyes before he turned away.

"This is really hard to say." Chad gazed down at his hands and shook his head. When he looked back up, he said, a little too loudly, "Kelly, I think you're a really great girl."

Kelly dropped Chad's hand and sat back in her chair. Dustin was right after all . . . he was breaking up with her! *Chad* was breaking up with *her*! "Who is it?" Kelly demanded, trying to keep the anger out of her voice. Deep inside, she was praying that Dustin had not been right about *everything*.

Chad sighed. "Nobody. I mean, I do have feelings for someone else, but she doesn't know it. . . ." Chad started to trail off before finding his voice again. "Kel, I want you to know I am really grateful to you for standing by me during the coma and all . . . I just, I don't think we should be together."

At that moment the waiter came back. He placed a nonfat double mocha (no whip) in front of Kelly and a gourmet chocolate chip cookie and a shot of frothy steamed milk in front of

Chad. Kelly swirled the mocha with a wooden stick and pursed her lips. She wasn't sure what she was more upset about, Chad dumping her or Dustin telling the truth — and knowing before she did.

“So, you're breaking up with me?” she asked. The cute waiter who had been staring before looked back at Kelly and winked. In an instant Kelly remembered who she was and how much she could have — without anyone's help.

Chad was not just breaking up with her, he was doing her a huge favor. Once again the world was wide open. The possibilities were endless.

Confidence intact, she grabbed the wheel and began steering the wayward conversation in a new direction. There was still one thing she had to know.

“Is it Alison?” Kelly asked. Chad went white. It was all the answer she needed.

Kelly pondered this information for half a second. Alison would probably think she had won this round and the guy they had been playing tug-of-war with. But what exactly was Alison winning? Her sickly leftovers? The thought made

Kelly bite her lip to hide a smile. Alison could have them.

“I’m really sorry, Kelly. I wanted to tell you in person.” Chad was starting to babble awkwardly. Was he actually afraid Kelly was going to start crying?

Kelly leaned in close and put her finger over Chad’s lips to shush him. Locking Chad in her green-eyed gaze, she smiled her brilliant, bitter-sweet Kelly smile — the one that started at one corner of her mouth and slowly worked its way to the other side while her eyes remained full of concern. “Oh, Chad,” she said. “I’m so relieved. I was hoping you’d be the first one to say it. . . .”

Chapter Four



Jeremy held his hand over his mouth to hide a yawn. He was glad Alison had asked to meet him at Hardwired because he desperately needed a cup of coffee. Pulling open the door, he spotted Alison immediately and gave her a small wave, then motioned toward the line at the register to let her know he was going to order. Alison nodded back, unsmiling. She looked tense, sitting up straight and still wearing her coat. A steaming drink sat in front of her on the table, seemingly untouched.

While he waited for his coffee, Jeremy felt a funny flutter in his stomach. It was the same

feeling he got before he met his mother for the first time. Well, not the first time exactly, but the first time in seventeen years.

It had started with the car. That had been a real surprise. It was unloaded outside his father's mansion two days after his high school graduation, complete with one of those giant red bows, like the ones they have on commercials, and a little tag that said TO JEREMY. Of course, Jeremy just assumed it was from his dad. He even waited up late for his dad to come home so he could thank him.

"It's not from me," his dad had rumbled, looking irritated. "Your mother sent it."

"My mother?" Jeremy couldn't believe his ears. He and his father never talked about his mom. He had figured out in preschool that most kids had nannies, dads, *and* moms. He had two nannies and a dad. But when he asked his dad where his mom was, his father got so upset that Jeremy just assumed his mom was dead and that his dad was too sad to talk about it. Though Jeremy had wanted to many times, he never spoke about her again, and neither did his dad. Until now.

"My mother is alive?" Jeremy had asked.

"Unfortunately," his father had answered.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"She didn't want you to know. Apparently she's changed her mind," he'd said before tossing a magazine from the stack of mail on their massive granite kitchen island so that it landed right in front of Jeremy. "There she is."

Jeremy'd stared down at the beautiful smiling face of Helen Rose on the cover of her signature magazine, *Looking Good*, for a long time. He thought his father had been kidding, but he hadn't laughed. "Helen Rose is my *mom*?"

"Now you know," was all his dad had said. Then, without another word, he had gone to bed, leaving Jeremy full of questions.

From that moment on, Jeremy's life was different. He spent the summer tracking down every bit of information he could about Helen Rose and her family. He wrote letters to his mom and obsessed about his newfound relations. And just before fall, when he should have been packing up to move to Palo Alto to start his first year at Stanford, Jeremy had packed up

his winter clothes and driven his new car from Beverly Hills, California, to Silver Spring, Maryland.

It was a doomed mission from the start. Before he even got through Arizona, his father cut off his funds. His cell phone was dead by Colorado. By the time he arrived in Silver Spring, he was totally broke. He was not looking forward to meeting his mom and immediately asking for money . . . and for better or worse, he never did. The day Jeremy arrived in Silver Spring was the day Helen Rose was arrested.

For a week Jeremy lived out of his car and wondered what to do next. With no place to go, he enrolled in the local junior college on scholarship and took a job as a tutor. It was pure luck that his first student turned out to be friends with Alison Rose.

Then he decided to visit his mother in jail. Meeting Helen behind bars had been more surreal than any of his father's blockbuster movies. He visited her almost daily in the beginning. She seemed so happy to see him, even had him do errands and favors for her like a real son. It seemed like she was ready to welcome him back

into her life. And he couldn't wait to meet his sister.

That's where Helen had drawn the line. "Please," she had begged, "Alison and her father don't know anything about my marriage to Harris. I think it's important for me to tell my husband, Jack, first, so we can deal with this as a family. And I want to tell Alison myself, too." So Jeremy had waited for his mother to break the news. Only she never seemed to get around to it. And by the time he had grown impatient enough to try to contact Jack Rose himself, the guy was nowhere to be found.

Picking his steaming paper cup off the counter, Jeremy looked toward the table where Alison was tapping her foot and picking at her nail polish. At least she had taken off her coat. He remembered the night not so long ago when he had shown up at her house, the infamous Rose estate, to find her there alone and the place completely empty. He wished he could have told her then that he was her brother. And he wished he could tell her now. She looked like she could use a friend . . . or a brother.

"Hey." Jeremy sat down, smiling at Alison.

“Hey,” she said back. She did not return his smile. Jeremy figured something had to be up between Alison and Zoey. That was the only reason Alison would call him, unless . . .

“So, Jeremy, have you heard from *Mom* lately?” Alison asked, raising an eyebrow. Her lips were drawn in two thin lines.

She knew! “When did she tell you?” Jeremy asked excitedly. He felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The secret was finally out.

Unfortunately, Alison did not share any of his excitement. “When did she tell *you*?” she shot back angrily. “How long have you been keeping this secret from me?”

“I found out in June. Most of my life I had no idea,” Jeremy started to explain.

“And now you think you can just show up, lie to us and our friends, sneak around and spy on us, and you’ll just be *welcomed* into the family?” She glared at him with furious blue eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“I wasn’t sneaking and lying,” Jeremy defended. He was shocked by Alison’s accusations. This was not what he expected at all.

“So you’re saying you *didn’t* take the job tutoring Zoey to find out about me?”

“No! I needed the money!” Jeremy shot back. “I admit, when I found out Zoey was your friend I was glad — she’s really great. And we both know she doesn’t really need tutoring. . . .”

“So you were using her.” Alison nodded and shot him another nasty look. “Sweet.”

“Hang on a second,” Jeremy said, leaning closer and struggling to recover from the all-out attack. “I would never use Zoey or do anything to hurt her. I really care about her. I kept the job because I needed the cash.”

“Is that why you tracked down Mom, too? For money? Will you be going after Grandmother next?”

“No!”

“Don’t think for a second that you can get to Grandmother through Mom. They hate each other. And don’t think Mom is going to be the perfect mother she looks like in magazines, either. Because she’s not.” Jeremy had never seen Alison look so hard before — not even when she was on the stand testifying against their mother.

“I don’t need your Diamond money,” Jeremy said evenly, trying to hold back his own anger. “Money is all I’ve had for most of my life. I came here hoping to find the rest of my family, to get to know my mom . . . and my sister.”

Jeremy thought he saw Alison falter a tiny bit but couldn’t be sure. “And who are you to accuse me, anyway? At least *I* didn’t lie under oath to convict . . . *Mom*.”

This time there was no denying it. Alison flinched. She did not refute her behavior — confirming what Jeremy had suspected. But was it the word *Mom* or *convict* that made her flinch?

Chapter Five



The house lights came on slowly as the movie credits rolled, and Tom realized he was sad to see the movie end. Not that it had been anything special — just your typical, totally predictable action-intrigue-adventure flick. But he was enjoying sitting in the dark next to X, not thinking, not talking, just holding hands and . . . *What?*

With a start, Tom saw that his fingers were, in fact, laced together with X's on the armrest between their seats. When had that happened?

Not wanting to call attention to it, Tom left his hand where it was until he had to put on his

coat. X pulled on her jacket, too, and a second later their fingers were re-entwined. Though he was surprised to find himself hand in hand with the most intriguing girl at Stafford, the real shocker for Tom was how comfortable and natural it felt.

Without speaking, the pair stood and followed the crowd out of the theater. Outside, Tom blinked in the slanted late-autumn sun. He didn't go to matinees often, and coming out of one made him feel like he'd been napping in the middle of the day.

X covered her mouth with her free hand. "Oooh," she yawned. "That made me sleepy. What do you say to a cup of coffee?" She shivered and leaned closer to Tom.

Coffee sounded good. Tom nodded, trying to hang on to the carefree feeling he'd had when they were sitting in the dark. He was not going to overthink. He was just going to let this happen.

True, X was not Alison, the girl he really wanted to be with. But she was gorgeous, with her liquid-brown eyes, shiny black hair, and long legs. And better still, X was easy to be with. She was not high-maintenance like Kelly or crazy

like Audra. X didn't need anything, didn't ask for anything. Except a simple cup of coffee . . . something he could totally get behind.

"Can you believe that guy, what's-his-face?" X struggled to come up with the name of the actor they'd just watched leap from moving vehicles and dangle out of a helicopter. "He's so full of himself, he's about to split wide open," she joked. "I think they should have billed that as a buddy movie starring Rex Leonard and his ego."

Tom laughed. It was true.

"Who needs fans when you love yourself that much?" X went on.

"Egos don't buy tickets," Tom said.

X nodded. "Good point. Plus, his teeth-whitening treatments must be pricey."

For the next several minutes, Tom and X walked in comfortable silence toward Hardwired, Zoey's favorite downtown café. Tom was a little amazed that the lack of conversation didn't feel weird. With X, nothing did. Tom tucked his chin into the collar of his jacket to block the cold wind. When they got to Hardwired he opened the glass door with one hand and let X lead him inside.

The warmth and smell and noise of the milk frothing welcomed them both. X spotted an open table and pulled Tom toward it, but he tugged her back toward the register.

“Let’s order first,” he suggested. “Or I can order while you grab a seat. What do you want?”

“Oh, I’ve got what I want.” X raised her eyebrows suggestively and squeezed Tom’s hand tighter. “And I’m sticking right here with you until I get a coffee to go with it.”

Tom focused on a brownie in the case by the register, willing himself not to blush. He was not successful.

Chapter Six



“Look, I don’t really care what you’re after,” Alison said in a harsh whisper to her newfound half brother. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay away from my friends and my family.” It sounded like a threat when she said it, but Alison knew it was actually more of a caution. Jeremy didn’t realize the bullet he had dodged by avoiding Helen Rose for most of his life. If he had half a brain cell he’d walk away — no, *run* — and avoid the sticky Diamond business altogether.

Jeremy sat back in his chair and held up his hands in surrender. “I don’t get why you’re so mad. I haven’t done anything wrong here,” he said defensively. He blinked, and Alison noticed

that his blue eyes looked almost exactly like hers — without the mascara. She was taken aback to see her eyes in a guy's face, and she wondered why she hadn't noticed them before. Jeremy took advantage of the silence. "I don't have any more control over this than you do, so why are you taking everything out on me?"

Good question. Alison stared at the untouched drinks cooling on their table. She felt a little embarrassed. Now that she thought about it, she wasn't really sure she even *was* mad at Jeremy. She was mad at her mom. But *somebody* had to pay and, well, here he was.

Wishing she could disappear or at least rewind the last twenty-four hours and do them over, Alison looked away. Her eyes settled on a set of men's leather boots standing beside another stylish low-heeled pair in the coffee line. The shoes looked familiar, and as her eyes traveled up past the pricey-looking jeans to the locked hands and the wintry jackets, she knew whose faces she was going to see before she got to them. Tom and X!

As if she wasn't feeling crappy enough. Seeing Tom cozy and laughing with X made Alison's

heart collapse in on itself. All of the air went out of her body as the couple turned and headed right for her. Alison tried to turn away but was transfixed by the easy way Tom was smiling at X. Just three days before, he'd said he liked *her*! And worse, she'd believed him. How could she have been such an idiot?

Alison looked desperately at the door, wondering if there was any way she could escape before Tom saw her. By the time she looked back, it was already too late. Tom had spotted her. And Jeremy had spotted Tom.

"Hi, Tom, how's it going?" Jeremy greeted him easily as Tom and X approached.

Tom pulled his hand away from X so fast, he looked like he'd been burned. "Oh, Alison, what are you doing here?" he asked, a look of panic on his face.

"Just leaving," Alison said under her breath. She quickly gathered up her coat and bag. Standing to go, she looked back at Jeremy. "Careful what you wish for," she told him, a vision of her grandmother flashing through her mind. "You might get more family than you ever wanted."

Leaving Tom and Jeremy gawking, Alison fled.

“See you later, Alison,” X called after her.

Not if I see you first, Alison thought.

Flagging a cab, Alison hit speed dial #1 on her phone. Zoey. She’d been feeling terrible about their late-night fight and was ready to set things right. But there was no answer, and she didn’t want to leave a message. She tried again and again. Dialing and hanging up. Dialing and hanging up. When the cab reached the Reeves’ house, Alison quickly paid the fare and hurried inside.

She raced up the stairs before Aunt Phoebe could catch her and quiz her about her day and whereabouts and plans. Grabbing a rumpled lump off her bed, she raced back downstairs and out the door to the side of the garage where the Reeves’ garbage was housed in a decorative little shed. Opening one of the cans, she threw Tom’s sweatshirt into the stinking darkness and slammed the lid back down. “Thanks,” she muttered, “for nothing.”

Chapter Seven



Zoey strolled to the front door, eating an apple and smiling to herself. It had to be Alison on the other side, coming to apologize . . . and it was about time.

But the person standing on her front porch was not Alison. It was Jeremy.

“Did I forget a tutoring session?” Zoey asked, feeling a little worried. She hated being flaky, especially where Jeremy was concerned.

Jeremy shook his head, and Zoey saw then that he looked upset. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah. I mean, no. I mean . . . do you have a second to talk?”

“Of course.” Zoey nodded and led him into the den, where Jeremy flopped down on the couch with a huge sigh. “I was just at Hardwired with Alison, and she kinda flipped out.” He kept his coat on and his hands buried in the pockets.

“Really?” Zoey raised an eyebrow, but didn’t let on that Alison had flipped out on her, too. Or that she knew why.

“She said I was a liar and a sneak, and that I’d better stay away from *her* family. Like I’m some kind of outsider.” He paused and looked Zoey square in the face, and Zoey thought for a second that there was something there — something different. Then, in an instant, it was gone. “She told you, didn’t she?” he suddenly asked.

“That you’re her brother?” Zoey said, coming clean. “Yeah, she told me.”

“And?” His eyes were so blue today.

Now it was Zoey’s turn to sigh and flop down on the couch. “And it sucked. I mean, I wished you’d just told me when you found out that Alison and I were friends.”

“I wish I could have,” Jeremy said. He reached out a hand tentatively, as if to touch her hand,

then pulled it back. “And I would have, but Hele — my mom asked me not to let on that I was her son yet. To anyone,” Jeremy said quietly.

“And you do everything Helen Rose tells you?” Zoey asked, unable to keep the incredulous tone out of her voice. “Uh, didn’t she abandon you when you were a baby?”

Under raised brows, Jeremy’s blue eyes looked hurt, and Zoey immediately regretted her words. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t fair,” she admitted.

“None of this is fair,” Jeremy replied with a resigned sigh. “I came here looking for the other part of my family. Believe me, if I’d known that this was what I’d find, I might have stayed in Hollywood.”

Zoey laughed gently, breaking the tension. “C’mon,” she teased. “Isn’t this the homecoming you’d always dreamed of?” It was so sad it was almost funny. “Your mom is in jail and your half sister is acting like everything is your fault? I don’t know what’s up with Alison, to tell you the truth. I think living with Kelly is rubbing off on her or something.”

“She was like an icicle,” Jeremy confirmed with a shiver. “She even claimed I was after her grandmother’s money.”

“You mean *your* grandmother’s money. And that’s because that’s what *they’re* all after,” Zoey said with disdain. “That’s all those Diamonds care about — money.”

Zoey felt a twinge of guilt for lumping her best friend in with “those Diamonds,” but quickly dismissed it. The girl she thought was her best friend assumed that Jeremy was just using Zoey to find out about *her*, that he didn’t even like Zoey for herself. But here was Jeremy confiding in her, seeking comfort and advice. He was being a real friend. A better friend than her actual BFF.

For a second Zoey wished she could spill her guts to Jeremy the way she usually did with Alison. Diamond drama aside, Zoey *really* needed a confidant about now. She wanted desperately to talk to someone about the file she stole from Dr. Wilson’s — her late mother’s psychiatrist’s — office, and everything she’d read about her mom . . . and dad. Not to mention the recent death of Dr. Wilson’s daughter, Audra,

which Zoey had witnessed. She was actually considering spilling everything to Jeremy when he abruptly got to his feet. Where was the fire?

“I’d better head out,” he said. Zoey clamped her mouth shut and tried not to show how hurt she felt as she nodded mutely. “Thanks for letting me vent, Zoey.” As he fumbled for his coat, the back of his hand grazed hers. “I knew you’d understand,” he added, looking her in the eye. Zoey felt the heat in her cheeks as she followed Jeremy to the front hall.

“Anytime,” she said, trying to ignore her pounding heart and pulling open the large wooden door. “You know where to find me.”

“Yes, I do,” he agreed with a winning smile. Zoey almost thought she saw that look again — the one that was a little different — but decided it was nothing. He gave a wave, then hurried through the chilly evening air to his Saab. Zoey watched him roll down the driveway. Even after Jeremy was out of sight, she stayed where she was, shivering. She stared up the street, straining to catch a glimpse of a cab, or the Reeves’ family car, bringing Alison crawling back to her. But the street was empty.

Chapter Eight



Buzzing from her encounter with her major crush, Zoey poured herself a giant glass of Coke and headed up to her room. Grabbing Dr. Wilson's stolen file from under her mattress, she propped up the pillows at the head of her bed and got comfy to read . . . again.

Zoey had read her mother's psychiatric file a dozen times, trying to make sense of the cryptic notes. There were no complete sentences, and yet many things were clear. Zoey's mom had been terribly unhappy. She'd had regular anxiety attacks, despite taking medications to control them. She was worried about her marriage, but felt hopelessly unable to fix it. The more

depressed Zoey's mom became, the more Zoey's dad withdrew.

Wiping her eyes, Zoey flipped through the rest of the pages. She hated the familiar, lonely feeling she got from reading this stuff. But she was looking for something new, something that would shed more light on the last weeks and months of her mother's life. It seemed like such a muddled mess.

"Just like my fight with Alison," Zoey said aloud, wishing again, desperately, that she could talk to her friend. Alison was a great listener and usually had insight to offer. At least, the old Alison did.

Zoey felt a flash of anger. Why hadn't Alison called? And how could she decide to be friends with Kelly after everything that piranha had done to her? If Al was back in Kelly's clutches . . . well, then Zoey had been horribly wrong about her, and it was time to move on. There was no way that Alison could be friends with both Zoey and Kelly. Eventually the girl would have to choose. Or Zoey would. She was nobody's tag-along.

Zoey just hoped Alison would pull her head

out before it came to that. All Zoey needed was an apology. Until then, confiding in Alison was not an option. So who *could* she confide in?

Gathering the papers neatly into the folder, Zoey got to her feet, left her room, and headed down the hall with them still in her hand. “Duh,” she whispered to herself. Jeremy and Alison were out, but the person she should be talking to about her mom was living right here in this house, and had been here all along.

Zoey knocked lightly on Tom’s door.

“Hold on,” she heard him say as she stepped into the room. He was on the phone. “What’s up?” he asked, covering the speaker with his thumb.

“Can I talk to you?” Zoey asked.

Tom shrugged and shot her a “can it wait?” look. Zoey hesitated, pressing the file folder close to her chest. Now that she was here, she was questioning her decision. Not long ago, Tom had come to her with information. He was sure that their father had played a major part in their mother’s death, and Tom had been ready to go to the police. It was Zoey who had talked him

out of it, and afterward Tom kind of flipped out. Bringing their mom up now could be a huge mistake.

“I’ve gotta go,” Tom said into the phone. “I’ll call you back in a minute.” The person on the other end said something, and Tom laughed. “You got it,” he added before snapping his phone shut.

“Who was that?” Zoey asked, pretty sure she knew the answer.

“X,” Tom replied with a smile. “And I need to call her back. What do you want?”

Zoey stepped farther into the room and sat down on the edge of Tom’s bed. “What do you know about Douglas Wilson treating Mom?” she asked.

Tom’s easygoing expression disappeared, replaced by a glower. “Not much,” he said. “I know it didn’t save her,” he added bluntly.

“Yeah, but do you think he could have done anything to pre —”

A tap on the door made Zoey jump and clutch the file closer to her chest. The twins’ step-mother, Deirdre, appeared, holding a cell phone

with a fogged-up screen. “Zoey, honey, is this yours?” she asked. “I found it on the kitchen counter with a note from Lucia. She said it accidentally got washed with the sheets.”

Zoey groaned and took the phone, realizing that she’d left the phone in her bed after her late-night call with Alison the night before. She pressed a few buttons but got nothing. It didn’t even turn on. “Dad’s gonna *love* it when I tell him I need a new phone,” she said with an exasperated sigh.

Deirdre patted Zoey’s arm. “Don’t worry, sugar. I’ll tell him it was my fault.”

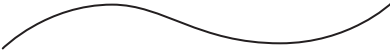
Zoey looked gratefully at her pregnant stepmom as she toddled out of the room on her three-inch pumps. She had been barfing a lot less lately, and Zoey was grateful for that *and* the fact that she was willing to take the heat for her.

Stuffing the drowned phone into her pocket, Zoey headed out the door after Deirdre.

“Wait, what were you going to ask me?” Tom called, opening his cell again. Despite his question, he was clearly more interested in continuing the conversation he’d been having with X.

“Never mind,” Zoey replied. “Just forget it,” she added in a mumble to herself. But how could she forget that her mother had died too young and utterly unhappy? And how could she stop thinking about it until she found out why?

Chapter Nine



“Hi, Chad,” a voice called out sweetly.

Chad looked up and saw a girl he was pretty sure he’d never spoken to standing in the hall as he made his way toward his locker. “Hey,” he replied, half smiling. He tried to keep walking, but the girl, a senior he guessed, stepped right into his path.

“It’s great to see you back,” she gushed. “And I just wanted to let you know, if you need anything, if there’s anything I can do, you just say the word.” She leaned in kind of close and smiled broadly. “Like, I could help you with your homework, or —”

“Chad, my man!” A beefy hand pounded Chad on the shoulder. Trent, the captain of the football team, was about to split his face from grinning. “It’s good to have you back!”

“Thanks, thanks a lot,” Chad said, staggering. The dude could probably bench-press two-fifty. “It’s good to *be* back,” he had to admit.

“Ooooh, Chad,” another girl he vaguely recognized cooed. “How are you feeling? Does it hurt?” She squeezed his arm as if she needed to confirm that he was real.

“Uh, no, not really,” he said, a little freaked out. He’d never been one to shy away from attention, but he was completely surrounded. He’d been getting the royal treatment all morning and was feeling . . . exhausted. It was all a bit too much.

Across the hall, Tom slammed his locker, caught Chad’s eye, and winked. A second later he had broken through the crowd and was whispering, “Milk it!” into Chad’s ear.

Chad laughed. Not a bad idea, really. Except that Chad had decided that from now on he wanted to pull his own weight — he wanted to

make it at Stafford without any “extra” help. Waking up from a coma to discover that he had cancer and had been cheating and lying his way through school was pretty disturbing. And he had no intention of hooking up with some girl just because she felt sorry for him, even if she *was* a senior. No. He wanted Alison . . . if he could only talk to her — alone — for half a second.

He’d tried to catch her when he first got to school. She’d waved, but with the swarms of students and teachers constantly surrounding him there was no such thing as privacy. He’d barely seen her since.

Maybe she’s avoiding me, Chad thought with a pang. Not that he could blame her. The last time they’d spoken, he’d pretty much told her to take a hike. But that was before.

“I’ve got to check the swim schedule,” Tom said. “You good here?” He raised his eyebrows at the crowd of fans.

Chad nodded as he finally reached his locker. “It’s tough being the cancer king,” he said, forcing a laugh and wishing he really felt light-hearted. It actually *was* tough. Everyone was

so nice, but Chad couldn't help thinking it was because they all thought he was dying.

"I'll catch you in the lunchroom, then."

Chad waved and piled his books into his locker, fielding questions the whole time. Then he slammed the metal door and headed down the hall, followed by half the football team and the entire cheerleading squad.

"Do you want me to get your tray?" Tami, the head cheerleader, asked.

"I got it," the assistant football captain, Doug, retorted, angling in to make a grab.

"Thanks, but I'm not dead yet. I can get it myself," Chad joked, stepping ahead of the crowd and grabbing a tray. He piled it high with pizza and salad and added a large soda for good measure. When he turned to face the crowded room, he found himself staring at a dozen eager faces at nearly as many tables.

"Chad, over here!"

"Sit with me!"

"I saved you a seat!"

Ignoring the Samaritans, Chad eyed the A-list table, his regular spot. Was he still welcome? He spotted Kelly opening her bottle of Evian.

He hadn't spoken to her since he'd broken up with her the day before. She'd seemed totally fine with it, and even played it off like it was her idea, but if Chad remembered anything about Kelly, it was that she *didn't* like being rejected and she *did* like revenge. He should probably watch his back.

Still holding her bottle cap in her hand, Kelly smiled across the room and waved Chad over. Chad sighed with relief. Kelly wasn't holding an obvious grudge, which meant that Chad was still welcome in her territory. Either that or she wanted to make sure she looked like a good sport.

As Chad set his tray down, he spotted Alison coming his way, carrying her lunch. He tried to make eye contact, but she never looked. Chad wondered again if she was avoiding him on purpose. Then he noticed she didn't seem to be looking at anyone.

Alison set her tray down at Chad's table next to Ruby Sullivan, leaving the seat next to Chad empty. Chad tried not to sweat it — she probably thought he was still angry with her.

“Dude, you think you got enough food there?” a voice teased. Hank, one of the running backs from the football team, set his tray down at the end of the table and pulled out a chair.

“I’ve got some weight to gain back,” Chad said. “And today everything looks good.”

“Even this disgusting food?” Kelly griped. “I don’t know why the school can’t get a qualified chef. The only thing worth eating here is the salad . . . and the yogurt.”

She reached across the table and grabbed the low-fat lemon yogurt off of Alison’s tray. “Thanks, Alison,” she said. “I didn’t see any lemon up there or I’d have grabbed my own.” She smiled coyly as she ripped the top off and stirred it with her spoon. Chad watched Alison’s expression, waiting for some kind of reaction. But Alison seemed to be ignoring her cousin altogether. She kept scanning the room, looking kind of intense. Chad wondered what or who she was looking for. Wasn’t everyone they knew at the table already?

“You really should be starting a diet this week, anyway,” Kelly said between bites, eyeing

her cousin playfully. "If you don't lose a couple, you won't be able to wear any of my hand-me-downs."

"Like I'd want to," Alison retorted, grabbing back the half-eaten yogurt and spooning up a bite without missing a beat. "Well, maybe for next Halloween."

Chad was laughing when he heard a voice behind them. "Is this seat taken?" X asked, pointing to the empty chair next to the spot where Tom always sat.

The table went quiet for several awkward seconds. Most people didn't have the guts to ask if they could sit at their table. X wasn't most people.

Nobody answered.

"Great, thanks," X said, pulling out the chair and sitting down like she'd been invited.

Alison was on her feet before X had picked up her fork. She dashed from the lunchroom without pushing in her chair or dumping her tray.

Immediately Chad stood and followed her into the hall.

Chapter Ten



Alison's stomach churned despite the fact that it was basically empty. Nothing was going right. She'd made an enemy of her "new" brother. She hadn't quite figured out how to handle things with her mother. And she knew now that Zoey was avoiding her — the girl was MIA at lunch and hadn't even shown up for history.

But X was the final straw. What was she doing at their table? It was a stupid question, Alison knew. X was waiting for Tom, of course. And Alison needed to swallow the bitter fact that she had screwed things up with Tom for good. His ship had sailed and landed in the peaceful harbors of Port X.

I'm such an idiot, Alison moaned inwardly. Why did she always fall for guys she couldn't have? What was *wrong* with her?

"Alison!" A familiar voice called out behind her, but it was not the one she wanted to hear. Footsteps were closing in. "Alison, we need to talk."

Not now! Alison thought. She didn't have to turn around to know who was tracking her down. Chad. What could he possibly want? Homework help? Now that he was back at school, it seemed the whole world was begging to wait on him. Couldn't he find someone else to do him a favor?

"Alison, wait." Chad gently grabbed her arm to stop her, then turned her around. He was unexpectedly close, and her breath caught in her throat at the intensity of his gaze. She could tell he was not looking for help on a quiz. But nothing could have prepared her for what he said next.

"Alison, I . . . I want us to be together. I miss you. I miss us."

"Us?" Alison repeated. Hadn't he closed that chapter when he told her that they should

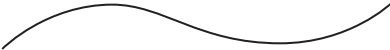
forget the past and just be friends? He may have forgotten, but the sting of *that* little conversation was still with her.

Chad's eyes were full of sincerity as he continued, "I still love you. It's always been you, Alison."

Oh, not always. Alison remembered how awful it had been the day Chad dumped her in the hall. Sure, he was Kelly's puppet and she tugged the strings cruelly. Still, *he* had done it. When that bitter memory faded, Alison recalled another moment they'd shared in the Stafford hall. The brief conversation they'd had right before he'd slipped into his coma danced through her mind. How happy she'd been to hear that he still loved her. That he wanted her back. But now . . . now everything was different. *She* was different.

"Chad." Alison wavered, unsure of what to say. She didn't want to hurt him. They'd been through a lot together, and she would always care for him. But not like that. Not anymore. "I'm sorry, Chad," she said quietly. "I just need to be on my own right now."

Chapter Eleven



X sipped her bottled water and gazed at the group of kids seated at the table. Things had clearly shifted. Despite Alison's rapid departure, it was obvious that she'd gone from the bottom back to the top of Stafford's social scene. Only she didn't look happy about it, and it appeared as though she'd had to cut Zoey loose to do it. Kelly, of course, was still the queen bee — at least in her own mind.

X found it all pretty entertaining. Kelly Reeves had been running the A-list show since she'd arrived at Stafford. There was no reason to burst her bubble by letting her know how foolish her little schemes were. She wouldn't get it, anyway.

Across the room, Tom stepped into the dining hall and flashed her a smile as he got into the food line. X smiled back. He really was cute, in a preppy kind of way.

As Tom crossed the lunchroom, X noted the affectionate expression in his eyes. Her well-timed late-night phone call was just the ticket to get him off the Alison track and onto track X. The fact that Tom had confided to her about his feelings for Alison had only made things easier.

"Hey there, beautiful," he said quietly as he set his tray down next to her.

"Hey there, yourself," she replied easily, smiling into his eyes. She liked how wide set and dark they were, like little pools of melted chocolate.

"You never eat anything," Kelly said, sounding a little whiny as she eyed X's near-empty tray. "Aren't you ever hungry?"

"Of course," X replied. "Just not this early in the day."

Tom nodded. "It's strictly water and coffee until two P.M."

X laughed. "And chocolate," she added, noting a look of jealousy in Kelly's eyes. Why were other teenage girls so obsessed with calories?

X sat back and looked around the lunchroom. The students were divided into the usual stereotypical groups — jocks, geeks, A-list, and A-list wannabes, plus a few loners scattered about. X spotted Zoey through a large window, sitting alone at a table outside, shivering and glaring out at the world from under her streaked, needing-to-be-cut bangs. She looked furious, as usual. X wished she could just tell her to relax, that things weren't all that bad. And if everything went according to her plans, they might just be . . . well, good.

Chapter Twelve



“Alison seemed kind of upset when I sat down at your table yesterday,” X said over the phone. “Do you think she’s okay?”

I wish I knew, Tom thought, staring out his bedroom window at the darkening sky. “She’s probably fine,” he said aloud. “But I don’t think she’d tell me even if I asked.”

“You don’t?” X asked quietly.

“I don’t know what it is,” Tom said. “Like I told you before, we were pretty tight when Chad was in his coma. I thought she might be falling for me, and I went kind of ape over her. But I guess I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s like she hates me now.” There was a pause that X did not

rush to fill. "It's just as well." Tom sighed. "I mean, she's totally off-limits because of Chad. I just can't go for my best friend's girl, or ex-girl —" Tom stopped, worried he was lodging his size-12 foot between his molars. What was he thinking, telling X this stuff? She was practically his girlfriend.

"You're such a good friend, Tom," X said before Tom could tell her that she was the other reason he couldn't keep chasing Alison. "Your brand of loyalty is hard to find." She sounded impressed. "It's one of the things about you that caught my attention, actually."

"Really?" Tom asked, surprised.

"Of course. And I'm secretly hoping that now that we're hanging out, I'll have a chance to get to know Alison better, too. It's about time I made some real friends at Stafford."

Tom laughed. "You could have all the friends you want."

"But I only want the good ones," X replied. She sounded dead serious. Tom felt totally flattered and glad he was talking to her. X really seemed to get it . . . whatever "it" was. And he appreciated that she didn't get all uptight when

he talked about Alison. She actually wanted to hear about her and wasn't threatened that he'd been so into another girl. Or that he was still getting over her.

"Oops, I gotta go," X said abruptly. "See you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Tom echoed before hanging up. He lay on his bed for a minute, wondering what to do. Zoey was at a tutoring session, Deirdre was out somewhere, and his dad was working late.

A swim, he thought, getting to his feet. A little exercise before dinner would be good.

Five minutes later Tom was in his suit, standing at the edge of their atrium lap pool. He slipped his goggles onto his face and braced himself for the frigid water before he dove in. The heater had been broken for months, and the first several laps were always painful. Tonight, though, the water temperature was chilly but not too cold. Somewhere right around eighty-two, he guessed. Somebody'd had the heater fixed. Nice.

Tom kicked hard and did a flip turn, pushing off the wall and coming up on his back. As he

gazed through the atrium roof at the darkening sky, he thought of Alison. He'd seen her in the hall on his way to the lunchroom the day before, but she was too far away to talk to. Ever since he'd made a play for her on Thanksgiving, she'd been too far away, even when she was nearby. Maybe it was all for the best, especially now that Chad had ended things with Kelly. Chad and Alison deserved each other, and Alison could really help Chad get through the tough days ahead. If only Tom could get his heart to stop knocking whenever he saw her.

Flipping again, Tom thanked the stars that X was being cool. And there had been no pressure from her, either. Since the hand-holding at the movies, she had been taking things slow. And, interestingly, that made Tom *want* to hold her hand again. She might not be Alison, but X was awesome. . . .

Tom finished up his mile and climbed out of the pool, ready for a supper of Cap'n Crunch — dinner of champions. But as soon as he walked into the house, things took a turn for the worse. Judging by the echoing silence, the girls were still out. Judging by the chill in the kitchen, DA

Daddy was home from work, and apparently he'd had a bad day.

"Where have you been?" Tom's father barked as if Tom's suit and towel didn't answer the question. "You left on every light in the house. Until you start paying the electric bills around here, you need to pay a little more attention. And you're dripping water all over the floor."

"Sorry, Dad," Tom muttered, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He dropped his towel on the kitchen tiles and swabbed it around with his foot.

"You've got to get it together, Thomas," his father continued as he flipped through the stack of mail on the counter. "I can't do everything for you."

Tom stared, racking his brain for the last time he'd asked his father to do *anything* for him.

"You need to get a new suit for my campaign launch party this weekend. Senator Bamford's son will be there, and I want you to talk to him. It's important for you to make a good impression, on him and everyone else. You are part of the face of the family, and I need you to act like a host. Kiss butt if that's what it takes. This party is

important, Thomas. I need to be able to depend on you.” He looked up, staring hard at his son. It was more than a little irritating.

Then maybe I should just stay home, Tom thought angrily. He had no desire to go to the launch party. At all. And if he stayed home, he could dig up more dirt on his dad . . .

Standing and shivering in the kitchen, Tom was suddenly overwhelmed by how much he despised his own father, despised how he acted, who he was, what he stood for. He’d been ready once to go to the police with the theory that his dad had killed his mom, ready to push for a conviction. But Zoey had stopped him.

“Now go get some dry clothes on,” his father barked. “I don’t want you sick at the party.”

Well, I don’t want you for a father, Tom thought as he swooped up his towel. *I would rather be sick than go to your asinine campaign launch,* he thought as he turned toward the stairs. Maybe it was time to launch something else — like his theory about his dad’s involvement in his mom’s death.

Chapter Thirteen



Kelly took the stairs to the “family room” two at a time. It was too early for bed. She didn’t have a boyfriend to call. She was sick of modeling new outfits in front of the three-way mirror her mom had installed in her walk-in (they all looked good). In short, she was bored, bored, bored.

Luckily, Alison was still up. Kelly found her cousin lying upside down on one of the large leather sofas that encircled the ginormous flat-screen TV. The surround-sound was blasting. The screen was lighting up Alison’s face like fireworks. Still, Alison looked completely glazed, almost Zen, with her hair hanging down so it

kissed the floor and her bare feet crossed over the top of the couch.

“Ew. Your hair is touching where people walk.” Kelly flopped down beside Alison, who quickly righted herself so she was sitting cross-legged.

“What do you want?” Alison asked tersely.

“Ooh. Testy. Can’t a girl watch TV with her cousin?” Kelly smiled at Alison’s black mood. The night might not be lost after all.

“Sure. Whatever.” Alison shrugged and tossed the remote into Kelly’s lap. “There’s nothing on.”

Kelly started flipping — looking for news, but with no intention of watching CNN or *Nightline*. The news she was looking for was locked in Alison’s head.

“How’s your brother?” Kelly asked, feeling mischievous.

Alison gave her a look.

“You talked to him, right?” Kelly pressed.

“Yeah.”

“So what did he say?” Kelly thought she noticed Alison’s skin growing rosier, but the girl wasn’t spilling.

Alison just shrugged again.

“Come on. He must have said something.” Kelly leaned in closer. “I heard you yelling on the phone, and it’s been two days! Spill it.”

“I wasn’t yelling at Jeremy, I was yelling at Zoey,” Alison clarified. But a second later she looked like she wished she could take the words back. “Everything’s fine now,” she added quickly.

Kelly tried to look sympathetic, but inside she was rolling on the floor holding her stomach. Alison had never been a good liar, and this was rich. Alison and Zoey, the world’s closest BFFs, were in a fight! No wonder Alison had eaten lunch without her.

“But . . . what . . . happened . . . when . . . you . . . told . . . Jeremy?” Kelly spoke slowly, like Alison was deaf or stupid.

“Look, that’s between me and him, okay? I appreciate you being cool about all this, Kel. But let’s just drop it, okay?”

“Okay. Whatever. I understand.” Kelly gave Alison a wounded look, the one that always worked when they were kids and she wanted

the bigger piece of cake or to hog Alison's best Barbie. Only it didn't work. Alison just got up and headed for the stairs.

"Thanks, Kelly. G'night."

Urg. Kelly flipped channels faster, letting her lower lip jut out in a full-fledged pout. Alison had some nerve, growing a spine after all these years. It would have been admirable if it weren't so annoying. After all, there was a new member of the family and Kelly needed to know more about him. Now.

Kelly grabbed the phone. Alison wasn't the only person with inside info. Her fingers flew over the keypad. She knew her aunt Christine's — her biological mother's — number in California by heart.

"It's me, Kelly," she said when her real mom picked up.

Christine sighed with annoyance. "And?"

"Jeez. Try not to sound so happy to hear from me!" Kelly pouted, kicking the throw pillow that had fallen off the couch.

"It's nice to hear your voice, Kelly. Now what do you want?" Christine asked. She wasn't bothering to sound sincere or, Kelly mused, maybe

she couldn't. Her acting skills were marginal at best.

"I was just wondering if you've seen Jeremy Jones since Thanksgiving," Kelly said smoothly.

"No. I came right back home. Why?" Christine seemed pretty eager to get off the phone . . . which made stalling a lot more fun.

"Well, I guess what I really want to know is if you two are dating."

"Don't be gross, Kelly. Of course not." Christine was sounding really peeved now. "Did you have something real to ask me? Because I'm very busy —"

"Wait." Kelly decided it was time to get down to business. Otherwise Christine might hang up before she got anything out of her. "So if you're not dating JJ, can I have his number? I think he's crazy cute."

Kelly heard Christine draw in her breath. Bingo. When she spoke again, her voice was low, as if there was someone else in the room she didn't want to overhear. And it was threateningly calm. "Don't get any ideas, Kelly. I don't know what you are up to, but I guarantee your grandmother would not like it."

“Why not?” Kelly asked, keeping up the dumb act. “She liked Jeremy fine at Thanksgiving. He’s rich, obviously good-looking, and comes from a good family.”

There was silence on the other end for a full three seconds.

“I’m telling you, your grandmother would not approve,” Christine repeated, this time in a clipped whisper.

“Who said I need her approval?” Kelly scoffed.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Christine hissed. Kelly heard laughter in the background. “We all need her approval.”

“So,” Kelly said, cutting to the meat of the matter, “if he’s so off-limits, why did you bring him to dinner at her house? You were just trying to upset her, weren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Christine said, speaking in a normal tone. Then, softer, she added, “I would never do anything to jeopardize my position with my mother. The last thing I need is to be removed from her will.”

Kelly smiled as the pieces of the puzzle came together. Christine must have brought Jeremy

around in an effort to get somebody *else* crossed off the list, to up her stakes in Grandmother's fortune. But who? Aunt Helen was already out. And Kelly's adoptive mother, Phoebe, was practically a martyred saint.

"I really have to go," Christine said.

That was fine — Kelly had gotten enough. "Me too," she said, quickly snapping her phone closed. It was always good to be the first one to hang up — and to have the last word.

Kelly flipped through a few more channels before finally stopping on a horror flick. Her mind continued to wander as she watched possessed zombies stagger, hungry and unstoppable, toward the last living souls in a devastated town. *Did everyone know about Jeremy except Alison and me?* she wondered glumly. How typical, and how disappointing.

Chapter Fourteen



“Are you coming to breakfast, sweetie?” Kelly’s mom had her head stuck in Alison’s doorway. “I made your favorite!” she cooed.

“On my way,” Kelly heard Alison answer with fake cheer. Kelly smirked when she saw the laden table. Alison’s “favorite” was actually her favorite breakfast from when she was seven — Mickey-Mouse-shaped Belgian waffles. And Kelly was going to love watching her goody-goody cousin choke them down for the third day in a row. If she couldn’t speak up for herself, Al deserved every torturous bite of the sickeningly syruped rodents.

Kelly’s dad was already seated, eating a waffle

and looking at the paper. Pushing away the grinning kiddie breakfast, Kelly took the coffee and grapefruit from her mother's place and concentrated on carving the red-fleshed fruit into skin-free triangles while her mom and Alison sat down.

"These are delicious." Alison smiled fakely at her aunt over the table after chewing up Mickey's ear. "Maybe you should make these waffles at your hospital fund-raiser," she suggested. "When is that again?"

Phoebe beamed at the compliment. "Oh, they already have a caterer coming," she said as she set down her coffee cup. No way could she think Alison was serious. The girl was blatantly buttering up her aunt for something.

"So, when is that again?" Alison repeated. "I bet you have a ton of planning to do."

Alison was sucking up like a vacuum. Kelly scowled and kicked Alison under the table, hard enough to leave a bruise. Alison didn't even flinch or turn to look.

"It's this Friday," Phoebe said. "And we'll be in meetings every afternoon this week. I hope you girls can get your own after-school snacks."

Kelly rolled her eyes. What were they? Nine? Turning slightly, Kelly studied Alison's face. Yep. Alison was trying to find something out, and seemed to have done it. Which annoyed Kelly all the more.

Standing and starting up the stairs, Kelly asked to be excused over her shoulder.

"But, honey, you didn't even finish your fruit," her mom fussed after her.

"I'll eat at school," Kelly called back. "I'm not hungry." She hurried down the hall to Alison's room and ducked inside. Crossing to the desk, she lifted the lid on the ornate box and checked the drawer. It was locked again. And the key was nowhere to be found.

Careful not to make any noise, Kelly tiptoed to her own room — taking the box with her — and finished getting ready. When she was sure Alison was using the bathroom, she sneaked the box into the kitchen to find her mother.

Phoebe was wearing rubber gloves up to her elbows and scraping food off the breakfast dishes into the sink. Gross.

"I don't know why you do that yourself, Mother. Isn't that what the help is for?" Kelly

didn't understand why anyone would touch used food if they weren't being paid.

"Sweetness, you know I like to do things for my family!" her mom cooed. What she really liked was to "be" what Helen was known for — a do-it-yourself mother, gourmand, decorator, and all-around home guru. Phoebe Reeves's domesticity had more to do with the chip on her shoulder than her desire to serve her family. Kelly thought it was ridiculous. It was not as if, before she was jailed, Aunt Helen had done housework herself — unless the cameras were on, of course. Aunt Helen understood the importance of a good staff. So what was wrong with her mom?

"Whatever," Kelly sniffed. She did not want to pick a fight right then. She had other things on her mind.

"Mom, where did you get this cute box?" Kelly asked in her sweetest voice. She held the hand-painted piece gingerly in her two hands and waited patiently for her mother to turn around. "It's just adorable. Is it an antique?" She ran a French-manicured nail over the box lid and smirked.

“Is what an antique?” Phoebe echoed, turning. Her eyes stopped on the box in her daughter’s hands and nearly froze. She let the water drip off her gloves on the floor without scrambling for a towel.

“This,” Kelly said, lifting the box a little higher. “It’s just darling. I am really into Asian stuff right now. I think I want to redo my room — so, can I have it?”

“No!” her mom said abruptly. She pulled off her gloves to cover her mouth. “I mean, yes.” She took a step closer to Kelly, reaching out to touch the box but stopping short. Kelly could tell she was taking great pains to keep her voice calm. She had definitely hit on something.

“Yes, it is an antique, but it is not mine to give away. It belongs to your aunt Helen. She asked me to keep it for her a long time ago,” Phoebe explained, looking flustered. Her cheeks were decidedly pink and her hands were shaking slightly.

“Yeah, but she’s probably forgotten about it by now,” Kelly said, hugging the box to her torso. “And it’s not like she needs it in solitary.”

In a surprisingly quick move, Kelly's mom snatched the box out of Kelly's hands. She held it protectively under one arm. "But darling, I gave her my word I would keep it safe," she said solemnly. "And I don't break promises."

"Gaw!" Kelly made a face. "I can't believe you're choosing Aunt Helen over *me*!" she whined, and crossed her arms over her chest huffily, though she never really wanted the box. What she wanted was to know if her mom knew what was inside. And as she looked back over her shoulder and saw her mother trying to open the little locked drawer, she got her answer. The drawer did not budge and Phoebe Reeves's expression showed utter relief.

She'd been right — she and Alison were, as usual, the last to know.

Chapter Fifteen



The waiting was what killed him. Chad tapped his finger nervously on the rail of the adjustable hospital bed. All week he had been feeling better and better, almost normal (if you didn't count the hole where his heart used to be). But the strength he had been building was about to be torn down.

Chad was waiting to get his first chemotherapy treatment. The drugs that would be injected into his body were his best hope for a cure. They would kill the cancer cells, but along with them, they would kill lots of healthy cells, too. The "chem" stood for the chemicals that would poison his whole system.

Poison, I can recover from, Chad told himself.
Cancer, I can't.

Chad looked around the empty room and wished for distraction or company. There was nothing but an empty chair, a window, and an IV stand. No Alison.

His mother had to drop him off. She'd planned to come with him and stay for his treatment, but his brother Will had an episode at school as soon as he'd arrived. His dad couldn't leave work to deal with it, and nobody could find Dustin (again). Cursing under her breath, Chad's mom told him he would have to be strong and go it alone, "just this once."

Right. "Just this life," is more like it, Chad thought. He couldn't even count how many times he'd done things on his own because his parents had to deal with one brother or another. In a kind of weird way, he thought his Hodgkin's might remind his parents that *he* needed them, too. Apparently, even with cancer, he was too capable to get special attention.

"Hey!" The door to the small room opened and Tom walked in wearing a knit cap with a brim and a broad smile. "Thought you might

want some company," he said, slouching into the one available seat.

Chad returned Tom's grin. "Do I ever," he admitted. "I hate to say it, but this chemo has me a little freaked."

"It'll be over before you know it," Tom assured him. Chad knew his friend had no idea what he was talking about, but was grateful for the distraction and Tom's upbeat attitude.

"So, what's up? What's new? What's going on with you and X?" Chad grilled Tom, eager to change the subject.

Tom's smile widened when Chad mentioned X. "Oh, you know," he said cagily.

"No, I don't," Chad fired back. "That's why I asked."

"Well, nothing is going on . . . yet. But we are going out again tonight. Apparently she likes movies." Tom shrugged. The smile never left his face. "And me."

For a second Chad felt jealous picturing his friend with the hot new girl. Tom and X had been spending more and more time together. She was often with him at school, though she never acted like a clingy girlfriend. And it sounded like their

relationship was just getting off the ground. *Say good-bye to your best friend*, Chad thought sulkily. Then he gave himself a mental slap in the face.

Cut it out. He knew he was being stupid and selfish. Tom, of all people, deserved a steady girl. Hadn't he stood by Chad through more than one girlfriend? Hadn't he spent enough time behind the proverbial third wheel?

And it wasn't as if Chad was lacking in female attention lately. He was Stafford's celebrity cancer victim. Problem was, the only girl who wasn't paying attention to him was the one he wanted.

"That's great," Chad said about Tom and X, meaning it. "I wish I could get Alison to come around. She seems so distant. I can't break through. It's like, I *know* she's the one, only she can't see it. I guess I put her through too much."

"Yeah." Tom nodded. His smile faded and he looked like he knew just how Chad felt. "It's the timing," Tom said thoughtfully. "I mean, with her mom and . . . maybe one day it'll all work out. We just have to give it time." Tom choked on the last words and started coughing, hard.

Chad had to pour him a glass of water from the hospital pitcher on the tray table by his bed and wait for him to recover.

“You okay?” he asked when his friend finally stopped gagging.

Tom blinked his watering eyes and nodded. “Good thing I’m in a hospital, though,” he gasped.

“Yeah.” Chad courtesy laughed, his mind still on Alison. “You coulda choked on your own spit and died.”

Chad wanted to believe that Tom spoke the truth, that one day it would all work out. But more than that, he wanted Alison right now. He wished he could rewind his life, just one year, and do it over. Get it right this time, and maybe erase the cancer while he was at it.

“Hey, don’t you have to get to school?” Chad asked, looking at the clock over the door. It was already a quarter after eight.

“School! Right!” Tom slapped his forehead, knocking his hat askew. “Knew I was forgetting something.”

There was a light rap on the door and it opened to allow in two nurses with an IV bag

holding Chad's chemo cocktail. "Here we go," one of the nurses said cheerily, like they were off on a roller-coaster ride or something.

"Sorry I can't stay longer," Tom said, slipping past them and giving Chad a wave. "Call me later. Let me know how it goes."

Chad waved back as the door closed. "Thanks for coming," he said, not sure if Tom heard him.

Working in tandem, the nurses hooked the bag on the long IV pole and inserted one end of the tube leading from it into the Port-a-Cath installed in Chad's chest. "Fill 'er up," Chad joked without laughing.

"It's going to be okay," one of the nurses assured him.

"That's what they tell me." Chad forced a smile. He wished he had asked Tom to stay. Watching the poison slowly drip into his body was way weirder than he thought.

"Remember, whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," the older nurse said. She was probably hoping to inspire. But her words had the opposite effect.

What if this does kill me? Chad wondered. *And just how much stronger do I have to get?*

Chapter Sixteen



The second the final bell rang, Alison was out the double doors. The cab she'd called during last period was already there, and Alison gave the driver the address of the jail as she slid onto the backseat. Ducking just in case Kelly happened to be outside, she began to breathe easier as they pulled away from the school.

For this she had been forced to lie — not a big lie, but a lie nonetheless. It was clear to Alison by Wednesday that she had no choice. Aunt Phoebe was so smotheringly nosy that lying was the only way Alison could visit her mother privately. So after making sure Phoebe was going to be busy with her own plans and could not check up on

her, Alison had told her aunt she was going to be late getting home because she was staying to try out for the school play. If only her life were actually that simple!

Knowing what lay ahead had made the school day the longest one all week — and each one had been excruciating. At least today she hadn't had to deal with Chad's sorrowful, pleading eyes. Only when she remembered why — that he was enduring his first nauseating chemotherapy treatment — she felt worse. And she was still dealing with Zoey *not* looking at her. The girl continued to avoid her like the plague. How many times did she have to call before Zoey would pick up? All of her attempts to catch Zoey's eye or talk to her were rebuffed. It was getting humiliating, especially with Kelly watching their every move.

There was no way Kelly could mind her own business, either. She liked to ask evil little questions to make Alison flinch — like whether the empty seat next to Alison was “saved” for Zoey, or if Alison had borrowed the new lipstick shade she was wearing from Zoey. “Oops! I guess you'd have to be speaking to do that,” her cousin said

innocently, as if she hadn't put her foot in it on purpose. The only things worse than not having Zoey on her side — and Kelly's dirty digs — were Tom's and X's sympathetic looks. Pity made things feel worse.

All that combined had Alison in a constant state of unease. She couldn't remember the last time her stomach felt settled. And as the cab passed through the security gates, she felt as though razor-winged bats were invading her innards. Her troubles with Kelly, Chad, Zoey, Tom, and X were child's play compared to what she was going to face now.

Imitating her mother's perpetual mask of calm, Alison signed the visitor roster and passed through heavy doors. She was about to see Helen Rose for the first time since she'd been sentenced.

Alison entered the visiting room and took a deep breath before sitting down across from her mother. Keeping one of her shaking hands under the table, she used the other to pick up the telephone receiver that allowed them to talk through the thick Plexiglas. Her mother did the same.

The two sat in silence for several long moments, each holding the black plastic phone to her ear. Alison's mother did not smile or offer any greeting. *Fine*, Alison thought. This was not a friendly visit. She was here for answers, and to finally rid herself of the documents she'd stolen from her grandmother's vault.

"Tell me about my brother," Alison finally demanded, keeping her voice and manner as steady as she could. "The truth," she insisted.

Alison did not expect her mom to have a huge reaction, and she didn't. She appeared unfazed. "What do you want to know?" she asked coolly. "I was young. I was married. It was a huge mistake."

"How long were you married to Harris Jones?" Alison asked.

"It was brief," her mother said vaguely. She closed her eyes. Alison was not sure if it was to help her recall that time in her life, or to block out the memories. Heaving a deep sigh, she opened them again. "We eloped," she explained. "Your grandmother hated everything he stood for, which is precisely why I married him. We hardly knew ourselves, let alone each other. By

the time I realized I had made a mistake, it was too late. I was already pregnant. I didn't want a baby, so Harris kept him."

The matter-of-fact way her mother was talking made Alison uncomfortable. It was like she was telling her the plot of a book, not the story of her life — or Jeremy's. It actually made her feel bad for Jeremy and the way she had treated him. How weird to be somebody's mistake. "Isn't that sweet?" Alison said sarcastically. "Do you think of me and Dad as mistakes, too?"

"Of course not," her mother snapped. "You were planned for."

Right. Alison was part of the Grand Plan. Only she hadn't turned out to be as perfect as the blueprint her mom had drawn up in her mind. *Maybe she did Jeremy a favor when she abandoned him*, Alison thought. She couldn't help but wonder what her life might have been like away from her mom and the rest of her family.

Helen Rose was no soccer mom standing on the sidelines of her children's lives, cheering them on and waiting with loving hugs and nutritious snacks. In fact, sitting there staring at her mother's face, so like her own, Alison couldn't

remember the last time they'd shared a joke, a tender moment, or had a heart-to-heart.

She is what she is, Alison told herself. *But she is not guilty of the crimes she is in jail for*. It was time to clear up *that* mess.

Alison waved a guard over before rifling through her oversize leather bag.

"I brought you something," she said into the phone.

Pulling a manila envelope from her bag, Alison handed it to the guard. A minute later Helen Rose held the envelope in her hands. She gave her daughter a puzzled look before pulling the papers out and studying them.

Alison watched her mother's face carefully as she read the documents. Not a trace of emotion rippled the surface of her skin.

Waiting for her reaction was almost painful, despite the fact that Alison was not expecting much. She had brought the stolen papers to clear her mom, and to absolve herself. She was not going to be a part of the lies anymore. And just having the documents out of her bag — where she'd had them for days — felt good.

Still silent, Alison's mother handed the papers back to the guard. When she turned to face Alison, there was a tiny crack in her veneer. Like the small lines near the corners of her eyes, they let Alison see the real person hiding inside the facade.

"I knew she wouldn't destroy everything in the fire," Helen said triumphantly. "Mother is far too fond of her impeccable records." She was smiling at Alison now. "Take them to Dante. Dante Ramirez."

Helen was suddenly all business, talking to Alison like she was her assistant or intern instead of her daughter.

Just like old times. "You want me to give them to Zoey's dad?" Alison asked, confused. "But he and Grandmother are —"

"You have to trust me," Helen said.

Trust you? Alison nearly laughed. "What possible reason do I have to trust you? I can't even remember the last time you told me the truth."

Amazingly, Helen looked hurt. The two Roses stared at each other for a long time.

“I’m not the only one who lied,” Alison’s mother said in a low grumble. “Perjury is a serious crime, Alison.”

Alison gulped. Then, having voiced her threat, Alison’s mom lightened her tone. “But now is not the time to look at the past. We need to move forward. Dante owes your grandmother a very big favor. Give him the papers. He’ll know what to do.”

Alison nodded, but inside she was fuming. She hated taking orders from her mother. She hated that her mother never acted grateful, to her or anyone else.

Alison grabbed the envelope from the guard’s hand and stood to leave. “By the way, you’re welcome,” she said hotly before slamming down the phone.

Chapter Seventeen



Zoey was not used to being alone. After years of living in boarding schools, just being by herself in the bathroom was kind of novel. Being alone in a six-bedroom, two-story house was downright creepy. But here she was. Daddy and Deirdre were out on launch-party detail, making sure the pressroom at the site was big enough for all the press her dad hoped to get, that the buffet tables were ten miles long, and the bar had enough stock to get everyone in a cash-donating stupor. Tom was out with X, again. Zoey was disappointed he wasn't home with her so they could talk. But she understood why he

had to get out, and she had to admit X was a better distraction for Tom than Audra had been.

Maybe I'm just jealous 'cause he has a friend, Zoey thought bitterly, flipping on three light switches and illuminating the long upstairs hall. Nothing like a Friday night on your own to remind you how much you miss your brother . . . or your best friend.

When all of the lights in the house and three of the televisions (for background noise) were on, Zoey went into her own room and pulled out her mother's file.

Written in pencil, sideways, on the edge of the paper was a note about her dad:

Susan frightened of D's temper. D working longer hours. Seems to ignore T and Z or demand too much of them.

If it didn't hurt so much, Zoey would have laughed. Apparently some things never changed — her father still alternated between ignoring and expecting too much of her and Tom. But what really scared her was the first note.

Her mother had been frightened of her father. A wave of guilt washed over Zoey. She wished again that Tom was with her. She was his mom, too.

When the doorbell rang, it made Zoey jump nearly clear out of her own skin. “Chill out!” she whispered, reprimanding herself as she headed downstairs. *It’s just the doorbell.*

Peering through the peephole before answering, Zoey spotted a squad car in the drive and two uniformed officers on the porch. Somebody for her dad, no doubt.

“Can I help you?” she asked, opening the door.

“Zoey Ramirez?” the female officer asked.

“That’s me,” Zoey said, glancing at the officer’s name tag. RICHARDS, it read.

“You’ll need to come with us.”

“Why?”

“We’re taking you in for questioning.”

“What?” Zoey could not believe her ears. She looked around for camera crews. This had to be a joke. Tom had set her up. “What did I do?”

Officer Richards shot her a “you really don’t know?” look before answering the question. “You’re under investigation for the death of Audra Wilson.”

Chapter Eighteen



Zoey barely had time to pull on her boots and turn out the blazing lights before she was hustled out the door and into the waiting cop car. The feeling that this was some sort of reality prank quickly faded, replaced by serious dread. If she had felt alone at home, she felt doubly abandoned now. It seemed like every time she thought the Audra nightmare was over, it came back. Would that girl never truly die? Why in the world did they want to question her again?

At least Dad isn't home to see this, Zoey thought as the car sped through the darkened

streets. Then again, he might have been able to get her out of it. *I don't have anything to hide*, Zoey reminded herself. *They probably just want to . . .* She stopped. She wasn't sure what they wanted.

She found out soon enough. When the car stopped, the male officer, whose name tag read ALVARADO, opened Zoey's door and led her inside Silver Spring's Juvenile Detention Facility. He and Richards took her to a small room with a table, three chairs, and a mirrored one-way window. She knew from the cop shows she'd seen that there were people on the other side, in the hall, watching her.

"Sit down," Officer Richards told her harshly. So much for a woman's gentle touch.

Zoey slid nervously into the cold metal chair and looked up at the pair of officers hovering over her. They did not look friendly. At all.

"Tell us about Audra Wilson," Officer Alvarado said.

"She was a girl in my class at school. We weren't really —"

"You hated her," he interrupted.

"What?" Zoey said. "That's not true."

“So you’re saying that you were friends?”

The officers weren’t messing around. Zoey tried to steel herself. “Look, Audra was stalking my brother and I was afraid of what she might do,” Zoey said, glaring back at both of them. “I think she got it in her head that I was the one standing between her and Tom.” The two officers exchanged a knowing glance. “She tried to kill me,” Zoey blurted, more loudly than she’d meant to.

“So you pushed her instead?” Officer Richards suggested.

“No!”

Another knowing look. Alvarado got up and went to the door. Zoey glanced into the hall and was startled to see a face she recognized. Audra’s mother, Beverly Wilson, was standing right outside.

Oh, my god. Zoey gulped. Beverly was staring right through Zoey with small, mean eyes, and just as cutting was the realization that sliced through her like a butcher knife. *She thinks I killed her daughter.*

It was so obvious. Zoey couldn’t believe she hadn’t seen it before. The Wilsons must have

thought that Zoey was responsible for Audra's death all along — that was why they befriended her. Why they invited her over and plied her with baked goods. Why they asked her to tell them the story of the awful event again and again . . . She stared blankly as Douglas Wilson, Audra's dad, wrapped an arm around his wife and pulled her away from the door.

Shivering, Zoey felt like slipping under the table. Her body had gone cold and numb. How could she have been so stupid? She'd fallen into their twisted little trap like a foolish baby bunny. She felt dumb for acting naive, and feeling dumb made her angry.

"I'm telling you it was an accident!" Zoey said, shaking off her shock and standing up. She was definitely innocent, but she was through being fuzzy and frightened.

"Sit down," Officer Richards ordered.

"I didn't push anyone. She was crazy," Zoey yelled. "If you ask me, Audra *wanted* to die!" Zoey directed her last sentence toward the mirror and hoped the Wilsons could see *and* hear her.

Her last words echoed in her head. *Does anyone really want to die?* she wondered. Did her mother?

A passage from Douglas Wilson's file appeared in her mind — she could see the pencil scrawl as if she were holding the paper in her hand. It described a recurring dream her mother had. Nearly every night it was the same. She was trapped in a blindingly bright room. The light hurt her eyes, and she wanted to get out. She found a door. It was wide, unlocked, and inviting, but instead of EXIT, the neon sign above the door read DEATH.

Chapter Nineteen



A long string of melted cheese flopped from the pizza slice Tom was holding onto his chin and sat there like a mozzarella goatee. X reached across the table and wiped it with her checkered napkin.

“Isn’t it the best?” she asked, smiling. She almost never took people to her favorite spots. And Juno and Mike’s was definitely a fave. The place looked like it was due for a health inspection, with its dusty Chianti bottle candles and ancient tile floors, but it had the best thin-crust, brick-oven pizza in the state, hands down.

Tom nodded, chewing busily. X could tell he appreciated the place as much as she did, and

did not regret sharing it for a second. She was really enjoying getting close to Tom . . . maybe a little too much.

In the last few days she'd had to bite her tongue and remind herself what happened when you opened up — you were exposed. Tom did it naturally. He was so genuine. It was one of the things she liked best about him. And the thing that made him so different from his twin.

Zoey had more walls than a labyrinth. And she didn't let them down for anyone — except Alison, and even that wasn't happening lately. X considered her own emotional fortress and, oddly, it made her feel closer to Zoey. They had a lot in common — if she could just find the right path to the center of that girl's maze, she thought she might be able to find a friend in the center. X had been hoping that getting close to Zoey's brother might show her the way. So far it had only made Zoey more suspicious, but luckily, X did not give up easily.

"So what's next?" X asked Tom playfully. They had been to a movie, and now dinner. But it wasn't too late yet. "Back to your place? I could go for some stupid TV," she confessed. "We don't

have one at my house.” It was only half true. She did not have a TV, but she didn’t really want to watch any. What she wanted was to catch Zoey on her home turf.

Tom sat back in his chair. Not a crumb was left on his plate. He had eaten almost two-thirds of the large pie himself.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I mean, I would say yes, but my dad might be there. And he is so uptight about the party tomorrow, I don’t think I can expose you to that.”

X knew that Tom wasn’t really joking, that there was more than a kernel of truth to his words. Mr. Ramirez had been making the poor guy nutty all week, and on the eve of his campaign launch party, he was probably set to blow. She totally got why Tom didn’t want to hang at home.

“Right, the party.” X gave Tom a sympathetic look. “How bad is it going to be?”

“Bad.” Tom cringed.

“Would it help if I was there?” X asked quietly.

“Would you want to be?” Tom looked dumbfounded by the mere suggestion, as if she had

volunteered to clean Porta Potties with her toothbrush or something.

“For you?” X smiled. “You know I would.”

Tom shook his head and grinned. “Okay,” he agreed, unable to hide his approval of this arrangement. “But you can’t blame me for anything you are exposed to.”

X nodded. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Chapter Twenty



After what seemed like forever, the officers left Zoey alone in the interrogation room. Zoey stared at the slate-green walls and actually wished that her father were there. As self-serving as he was, he could get her out of this mess in two seconds flat. Of course, then she would be in a whole other mess, with him, but even that was almost appealing compared to what she was mired in at the moment. Almost.

The silence in the empty room was deafening. Zoey stared at the mirror and wondered who was looking at her from the other side. She narrowed her eyes in case the Wilsons were still there.

She prayed that she could go home soon, that the worst was over. She had a feeling it wasn't.

Finally Officer Alvarado opened the door. "You can make a phone call now," he said flatly. He gestured for her to follow, and Zoey gratefully got to her feet.

Out in the hall, Beverly Wilson was deep in discussion with Officer Richards. Her eyes were ringed in red and she looked spookily like her daughter. Zoey didn't try to hide her glare as she passed them. They had intentionally tricked her!

"She's lying!" Beverly cried desperately, probably for Zoey's benefit. "Can't you see? She's making it up! She's as unbalanced as her mother." Zoey stared at the pay phone on the wall and did her best to ignore what Beverly was saying. Getting tangled up in her accusations would only lead to more trouble. But keeping quiet was difficult when you knew you'd been had. And when Beverly wheeled around in her direction and screamed, "You did this!" Zoey had to literally bite her tongue — hard.

Beverly took a desperate step toward Zoey, her face a mask of fury and pain. "Calm down,

Bev,” Audra’s dad said in a low voice. “You’ve got to get ahold of yourself.”

“I will not calm down!” she screeched. “Audra was a beautiful, brilliant girl. My girl! And she was not crazy. Her life was stolen, and somebody is responsible. Somebody has to pay!” She broke into sobs, leaning her head on her husband’s shoulder.

Zoey picked up the telephone receiver while Officer Alvarado slid a pair of quarters into the slot. Zoey was trying to decide who to call when she heard Beverly’s trembling voice again. “You’re not going to let her go, are you?”

“We’re doing everything we can, Dr. Wilson,” Officer Richards said in a low voice. “We brought her in for questioning as soon as we could, but we can’t press charges without significant evidence. What we can do is hold her overnight. . . .”

Overnight? The words echoed in Zoey’s overloaded head, and she suddenly felt ill. They were going to keep her in this pit until morning. Holy crap.

Rattled, Zoey looked at the receiver in her hand. Her fingers were poised to dial.

But Zoey had no one to call.

Chapter Twenty-one



Alison sat across from her grandmother at the carved dining room table and tried not to be furious. As much as she welcomed the strength her anger had been giving her, Tamara Diamond did not tolerate emotions. Ever. It would do Alison no good to vent her anger here.

When Alison had called to request a dinner date with her grandmother, it had been hard to keep her voice from shaking with fury. But she had done it then, and she could do it now.

"It's just like old times, isn't it?" Tamara murmured as she smoothly sliced her lamb loin with a mother-of-pearl-handled knife.

Uh, no, Alison thought. *It's nothing like old times*. And, she realized, she was glad. She was glad that she no longer lived with her grandmother. She was glad that she realized that she'd been lied to her entire life. And she was glad that she was stronger and wiser for it. Plus, she had the comfort of knowing that the stolen documents had been turned over to Dante Rodriguez — and that her grandmother couldn't hold them over her any longer.

Alison watched her grandmother chew her food, grinding each morsel into nothing before taking a sip of wine and swallowing. Grandmother Diamond was a stickler about proper eating habits, right down to the number of times each mouthful should be macerated before being sent to burn in her acid stomach.

Alison swallowed. "Aunt Christine seems very fond of Jeremy," she said, casually taking a big bite of scalloped potatoes.

"Alison, that's far too large a mouthful," Tamara scolded as if she hadn't heard what her granddaughter had said.

Chewing and swallowing quickly, Alison pretended not to have heard the reprimand. Two

could play at this game. "But then, why wouldn't she like her own *nephew*?"

Tamara Diamond coughed lightly and set her crystal wineglass down on the lace tablecloth. "Jeremy Jones is yet another one of your mother's foolish mistakes," she enunciated carefully, "as was marrying Harris Jones in the first place. For an intelligent woman, your mother makes an impressively large number of unwise decisions." She smiled at the space just above Alison's head. "I hope that you, Alison, are not so prone to bad judgment." She stared hard at her granddaughter, and Alison wondered if she was referencing a mistake from her recent past, or was simply generalizing.

"But —"

"That is all there is to say about the matter," Tamara said firmly.

Subject closed, Alison thought grimly. Not that she was surprised. Getting a satisfying explanation out of Grandmother Diamond was practically impossible. It was enough that she had gotten her to acknowledge the situation. Score one for the Roses.

“Will you be attending Dante Rodriguez’s campaign launch party tomorrow?” Grandmother asked, changing the subject. Tamara Diamond’s veiled demand had sounded like an inquiry. Alison nodded almost imperceptibly. “Good,” Tamara gloated.

Alison frowned, wishing she could explain that she was not planning to go to the party because her grandmother wanted her to. She was going for Zoey. Even though they hadn’t spoken since their argument almost a week ago, Alison had every intention of being there for her friend. She knew that Zoey would enjoy the party about as much as she’d enjoy having her legs waxed, and would need all the support she could get. And, Alison hoped, the intense situation might finally force her stubborn friend to come around.

“I have a surprise for you.” Tamara changed the subject again. A small smile played at the corners of her mouth.

Alison nearly choked on her lamb. Hadn’t her grandmother outdone herself in that arena already?

“I think I’ve had enough surprises,” Alison said quietly, after taking a sip of sparkling water.

“Oh, but you’ll like this one, I promise.”

Alison tried to guess what it might be but was at a loss. Knowing Grandmother Diamond, it could be anything. And as usual, the woman was not tossing out clues.

Suddenly an electronic ring echoed in the cavernous dining room, and Alison winced. Her cell phone. She’d forgotten to set it to vibrate before coming to the table. “Sorry, Grandmother,” she said sheepishly. She reached for her handbag to turn it off—but not before checking the caller ID. Maybe it was Zoey calling. . . .

Alison’s heart dipped a little when she saw that it was a call from an unidentified number—someone she didn’t know. She silenced the phone quickly.

Looking back at her plate of food, Alison found that she had lost her appetite. And maybe her best friend as well.

Chapter Twenty-two



Pick up! Zoey thought desperately as she listened to the phone ring. This certainly wasn't the way she'd envisioned her first call to Alison after their fight, but she needed to reach someone she could trust — preferably someone who wasn't in her family. Their fight seemed so insignificant now.

One. Two. Three. On the fourth ring, Alison's phone went to voice mail, so Zoey hung up. No way could she leave this in a message. She needed to reach somebody now. She took a deep breath, wishing she had her cell phone of numbers to scroll through. Alison was out, which meant that Tom was the next candidate. She

slipped the ejected coins back into the slot, quickly dialed his number, and crossed her fingers. She wasn't actually superstitious like that but figured she needed all the help she could get. *Ring. Ring.* Dang!

She pressed the cradle hook down and tried a third number — Jeremy's — grateful that she had it memorized. She wasn't too thrilled with the idea of telling him she was in jail, but she was desperate. The call went through, but Jeremy's voice mail picked up.

Zoey had to force herself not to slam the receiver down in frustration. The last thing she needed was for the cops to see her flipping out and think she was as “unbalanced” as Audra's parents claimed.

I can't call Dad, she thought. As easily as he could extricate her from the situation, the price would be too high. He'd totally freak. He was already running the risk of a coronary with his launch party tomorrow. The news that his daughter was being questioned and could cast an ugly shadow over his campaign coverage? Zoey would never hear the end of it . . . unless, of course, he shipped her off to another boarding school.

Releasing the receiver, Zoey's shoulders slumped. "I can't reach anyone," she admitted to Officer Alvarado. She thought she saw a flash of compassion in the policeman's eyes, but it was gone in an instant.

"Follow me," he said.

Zoey walked two paces behind the cop as he made his way down the hall. The Wilsons were gone now, thank goodness. Zoey wasn't sure if she would have been able to stop herself from lashing out at them. No matter how much they were hurting, luring her into their confidence only to turn her over to the cops was totally twisted. They were so desperate to blame someone — anyone — that they didn't care that she was innocent.

Zoey glared at the policeman as she stepped inside the cell.

"You can try your calls again in the morning," he said.

Zoey was speechless.

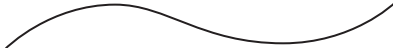
Creak — clunk! The heavy barred door closed behind her, and Zoey's knees buckled. This was too freaky. *Stay cool*, she told herself as she eyed her cellmate. *Stay cool.*

The other girl in lockup was sitting on one of the cots with her knees up. She had shoulder-length curly auburn hair that curtained her face as she hunched over a book. She kept her head down even when the door slammed, not once looking up.

Zoey checked out the slate-green walls. They were the same uninspired institution tone as the interrogation room. There was no mirror, and no window. Two cot-style beds stood against the wall, and a sink and a toilet, half-hidden behind a cement partition, were in one corner. The unoccupied cot was a little dingy but not too disgusting, really just a few steps down from some of the dorm furniture at boarding school. *It could be much worse*, she thought.

Completely exhausted, Zoey flopped onto the bed and guardedly eyed her newest roommate while she tried to ignore the musty smell of her pillow. She was contemplating sitting up when the girl looked her way. Her eyes grew wide. "Sophie?" she said excitedly. "Sophie, is that you?"

Chapter Twenty-three



Alison kicked off her flats, crossed her legs on the oversize glass-and-marble coffee table, and grabbed a handful of popcorn from the bowl on Kelly's lap.

"Hey, watch it!" Kelly protested as Alison spilled a few kernels on her cousin's new designer pants.

"Get over yourself," Alison replied. "It's not even buttered."

"Whatever." Kelly grabbed the remote and turned down the volume. They were watching one of Alison's favorite romantic movies from the eighties. The hair was hysterical, but the story got her every time.

"Hey, I love this part," Alison griped.

"You do?" Kelly made a face at the couple cuddling on-screen next to pushed-aside plates of Italian food. "I mean, really. That guy's got to have garlic breath!"

Alison laughed. It was true, but she missed being held like that. A lot, actually. Even though she didn't want that kind of relationship with Chad anymore, she was still feeling a little . . . lonely. Of course, that wasn't just about not having a boyfriend.

"How's Zoey?" Kelly asked, as if she could read Alison's mind.

Alison eyed her cousin. Was she fishing, or just trying to get under her skin? If she had an ulterior motive, it didn't show. "All right," Alison replied evasively, not really wanting to go there with Kelly. The more separate she could keep Zoey and her cousin, the better.

"Ooooh, movie night," Aunt Phoebe cooed as she came down the stairs. She scampered into the room and sat down on the arm of the couch. "What are we watching?"

Kelly hit PAUSE. "*We* are not watching anything, Mother. Alison and I are having a conversation."

Phoebe ignored her daughter's snide remark and turned to Alison. "How did your audition go, Alison?" she asked, her eyes eager. "Do you think you got a part?"

Alison was blank for a moment, then remembered the little white lie she'd told her aunt.

"What audition?" Kelly asked, sitting up and looking interested . . . and amused.

"The school play," Alison said quickly, shooting Kelly a meaningful look. Hopefully she'd play along.

"Riiiiight," Kelly agreed, nodding. "I completely forgot that you were planning to try out for the Stafford school play." She winked at Alison. "So tell us, are you following in Aunt Christine's footsteps? Will you be playing Maria Von Trapp?"

Alison scowled at her cousin, but right behind it was a laugh waiting to escape. And Aunt Phoebe was just sitting there none the wiser, waiting for an answer.

"So, how did it go?" she prompted.

"Terrible," Alison replied. "Just terrible. I forgot my lines and my voice cracked on 'Do-re-mi.'"

She covered her face with her hands to hide her nonexistent embarrassment.

Aunt Phoebe patted her shoulder reassuringly. "I'm sure it wasn't that bad, sweetie," she said. "And remember, even if you don't get a role, there's always next year!"

Kelly cleared her throat and Alison struggled to keep a straight face. This was the kind of ridiculous ruse she and Kelly used to play on Aunt Phoebe all the time, and it was fun. But behind her laughter, Alison knew that the silly secret they shared was based on lies and deception. Kelly could not be trusted. Alison was an island.

"I'm wiped," Alison said, getting to her feet with a stretch. "I think I'll head to my room." The desperate feeling that had been haunting her since she and Zoey got into their fight was suddenly back. Alison longed to talk to Zoey, to hear her voice. To have a real friend.

"But you'll miss your happy ending," Kelly said, a little sarcastically, taunting Alison with the remote.

I'm hoping to make one, Alison thought. "I've seen it before," she said aloud as she headed

upstairs. Behind the closed door of her bedroom, Alison hit speed dial #1. It rang through, but there was no answer. This time Alison left a message, but it didn't matter. Zoey was not there.

Chapter Twenty-four



“I can’t believe your name isn’t Sophie. You look exactly like this girl I met at ChETA,” the girl in the cell said, eyeing Zoey. “I mean *exactly*.”

“ChETA?” Zoey asked, hoping to get the girl off the “you look just like” subject. It was a tired one, for a twin.

“Yeah, you know. Children for the Ethical Treatment of Animals?” she replied, sounding a little put out that Zoey didn’t know what it was. As if she was supposed to have memorized the acronyms for every environmental and animal-friendly group out there.

“Sophie and I went to a bunch of sit-ins together, and a couple of rallies outside

makeup test labs. Do you know what they do to animals in beauty-product trials?" The girl shuddered. "It's criminal."

Speaking of criminal... Zoey wondered what the girl was in for, but not enough to ask. Ethical Girl was staring at her superintensely, like she still didn't believe that Zoey wasn't Susie or Sophia or whatever her look-alike's name was. It was creeping Zoey out.

"My name is Zoey," Zoey said slowly, hoping the name would stick. "And I have a twin, but he's a guy. So you must be thinking of someone else."

"I guess," the girl replied with a shrug, sitting back and picking her book back up. "I'm Dakota." She offered her name casually. She seemed pretty relaxed for being in juvie. Kind of savvy, and Zoey guessed maybe it wasn't her first time. She was dressed in authentically worn jeans, a ringer T, sneakers, and a zip-up hoodie. She had a discreet silver hoop through her nose and a small tattoo that said PEACE on her ankle. The girl was cool, no question.

"Sophie was a great rally girl," Dakota said, putting her book back down and starting to

mess with her hair. She pulled it up into a haphazard knot at the back of her head while she talked. “She always threw herself into the cause. She wasn’t afraid to speak out and didn’t care if she got in trouble. She was the real deal.”

Zoey looked down at her designer jeans and shoes and suddenly felt like . . . a fraud. What did she stand for? What did she want?

To get out of here, she reminded herself.

“And on the phone,” Dakota babbled, “that girl could squeeze money out of a pauper.” She sighed. “I miss her a lot, actually. We were at a rally together one day, and then — *poof* — she was gone. Disappeared. But I guess that’s the way it is for foster kids. Here today, gone tomorrow.”

Zoey lay back down on her bed, feeling like her head was going to explode. It was trippy being compared to someone she didn’t even know. And not measuring up! Ugh. Would she ever measure up? “Hey, do you mind if we don’t talk for a while?” she blurted. “I’m really wiped.”

“Fine with me,” the girl replied, going back to her book. Zoey could read the title now:

Slaughterhouses in America: The Untold Horrors.

Not exactly a beach read. Sheesh.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Zoey welcomed the silence that descended on the tiny cell. She stared up at the grimy, no-longer-white ceiling and listened to the other girl turn the pages in her book, then put it down at last. It must have been pretty late by now, and she was bone-tired. She kicked off her shoes, climbed under the thin blanket, and closed her eyes. Sleep couldn't come soon enough. . . .

Except her brain wouldn't turn off. She kept replaying the interrogation. She could see the cops' looks of disbelief and derision. Hear their questions — the same ones, over and over . . .

"I can't sleep, either," Dakota said after countless minutes had gone by. Zoey wondered how Dakota had known she hadn't been sleeping. The light in the room was fading, and Zoey could not make out Dakota's face any longer. "So, what're you in for?" her bunk mate asked through the semidarkness.

Murder, she almost said. Part of her didn't want to talk about it — any of it — and then part of her did. "It's complicated," she finally said.

“It’s always complicated,” Dakota agreed. “But if you want to talk . . .” She trailed off, leaving the ball in Zoey’s court.

Zoey felt a hollow ache in her chest. Here she was in a jail cell, essentially abandoned. Nobody knew where she was, and nobody seemed to care. Suddenly, venting to a stranger seemed like a great choice. What did it matter? Who could she tell?

“I saw a girl die,” Zoey began. “And her parents think I killed her.”

Chapter Twenty-five



Tom opened one eye and looked at the clock: 9:19. For one blissful second he thought it was just a regular Saturday and he could roll back over and sleep in. Then he remembered. Today was campaign-launch-party day.

Maybe I can sleep through it, he thought grimly, knowing that there was no way he could get out of going to the party. *At least X will be there,* he reminded himself. And she would be on his arm, too. That was something. He wondered how she would react to him leaking his theory about his dad's involvement in his mom's death to the press. Would she be surprised? Upset? He couldn't imagine her being anything

other than totally cool about it. He could not imagine X being anything other than totally cool about anything.

He was contemplating getting up, when his phone rang. Assuming it was X, he grabbed it and flipped it open. "I was just thinking about you," he said through his smile.

"Hello? Tom? Is that you?" said the voice on the other end. The connection was bad. And the girl on the other end wasn't X. It was Zoey. "Where have you been?" Zoey asked. She sounded relieved and horrified at the same time.

"Where have *you* been?" he asked, suddenly realizing that he hadn't seen his sister since school the day before. And until she called, he had assumed she was trying to sleep through the Ramirez party nightmare in her own room. "Where are you now?" he asked.

"In the juvenile detention center," she said. Her voice was shaking and the connection was getting worse.

"What? What are you doing there?"

"Trying to convince the cops that I didn't kill Audra. I've been here all night, and I need you to

come get me,” Zoey said, talking louder. The desperation in her voice was seeping through the phone line right into Tom’s ear.

“I’m there,” Tom promised, already pulling on a pair of jeans and a sweater. “Hold on, Zoey. I’m coming right now.” He snapped the phone shut, then opened it again.

“I need a car to District Attorney Ramirez’s house immediately,” he said after dialing the car service. He pulled on his sneakers as he gave the voice on the line the details. He knew he’d have to make up some lie for Dad and Deirdre about where he was going, but he didn’t care. He had to get to Zoey as fast as he could.

Dashing through his bedroom door, Tom ran down the hall and took the stairs three at a time. “Be back soon!” he called over his shoulder as he headed outside. He didn’t wait for a response.

Poor Zoey, he thought as the door slammed shut behind him. He scanned the street, hoping the car would arrive quickly. He couldn’t get to his sister soon enough.

Chapter Twenty-six



"I'm here to pick up my sister, Zoey Ramirez," Tom told the guy behind the detention center desk. The officer had a buzz cut and wore a navy blue uniform. His name tag said RYAN.

"She's being questioned," the cop said, barely looking up from the stack of papers in front of him.

"Could I at least see her? Or talk to her? Can you let her know I am here?" Tom pressed. He could still hear the panic in his sister's voice. She'd been locked up all night!

The guy glanced up long enough and gave Tom a disdainful look. "She's being questioned," he repeated, as if Tom hadn't heard him.

"I know, but —"

"You'll have to wait," he stated.

Tom felt a flash of anger. Who was this guy? Did he have to treat Tom like some kind of intruder?

"Do you know how long it will be?" Tom asked calmly. Getting mad wouldn't help him or Zoey.

Officer Ryan sighed heavily. "Now how would I know that if I'm not the one questioning her?" he asked sarcastically.

Tom held his hands up. "All right, I'll wait," he said, admitting defeat — at least for the moment. Officer Ryan was like a brick wall. No point banging his head against it.

Tom sat down in a mustard-yellow vinyl seat and stared out the small window. It faced an air-shaft, so very little light came through it. Tom jiggled his foot in impatience. Frustrated, he picked up a copy of *Boy Scouts Today* and started to thumb through it. The faces of clean-scrubbed boys doing good deeds smiled up at him. They looked . . . artificial.

I can't just sit here, Tom thought, feeling

panic rise. He needed someone who could break through Officer Ryan's cold stare. Someone who could get Zoey out of this place.

Unfortunately, the only person he could think of was his father.

Chapter Twenty-seven



Rolling over in bed Saturday morning, Alison grabbed her cell and checked for messages. Nothing. As she stared at the small silver phone, her heart sank. Zoey was still ignoring her calls. But Alison had decided she wasn't going to be able to ignore her best friend any longer.

Punching several numbers into her keypad, Alison held her phone to her ear and listened to the ring. "Hey, Tonio," she greeted the Reeves' driver when he picked up. "It's Alison. I need a ride across town. Can you take me? Great — I'll be outside in twenty." Alison snapped her phone closed and smiled. Her cousin would probably flip if she knew that Alison was using their driver,

but what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Besides, Alison needed to get to Zoey's house and find out what was going on. The girl was probably freaked about her dad's campaign launch party tonight, and the two of them needed to clear the air before that unfortunate event went off. They needed each other.

Alison pulled on her favorite jeans and a cashmere sweatshirt. After slipping on her shoes, she headed to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat.

"Good morning, sunshine," Kelly quipped over her cup of coffee and bowl of fruit and yogurt.

"What are you so perky for?" Alison asked suspiciously. "Did someone die?"

"Very funny," Kelly replied, sliding her fashion mag over to make room for her cousin. Alison grabbed a box of cereal and filled the bowl that Aunt Phoebe had left out for her. Dumping milk on top, she scooted into the chair and peered at the magazine Kelly was reading. The article was called "Teen Relationships: Friends or Enemies?"

How appropriate, Alison thought dourly. She skimmed the article until Kelly turned the page.

Spooning up the last bite, Alison stood and put her bowl in the sink. "I hate to eat and run, but I've got places to go," she told Kelly.

"Where should I tell Mother Hen you're headed?"

"Nowhere," Alison said evasively, fully aware that Kelly was asking for herself more than Aunt Phoebe.

"I hope you're heading to the salon," Kelly cracked. "You could seriously use some fresh highlights."

"Thanks, Kelly. I can always count on you to point out my deficiencies. But have you checked out your own hair lately? You're practically dishwater!"

Kelly scowled, but Alison saw the smile at the corners of her mouth before she darted out the door. "See you!" She hurried to the front hall and pulled her shearling coat out of the closet.

A blast of cold air assaulted her as she stepped outside and Alison was grateful for the cozy warmth of her coat. Tonio and the Reeves' black SUV were waiting, and Alison climbed onto one of the leather seats in the back.

“Zoey’s house,” she said, rattling off the address. While Tonio sped out of the drive, Alison sat back and wondered if Kelly was watching them pull away — and half hoped she was.

Ten minutes later Alison was standing on Zoey’s front stoop, ringing the doorbell. It took a few minutes for someone to answer, and it wasn’t Zoey, like it usually was. It was Deirdre.

“Oh, come in, honey!” she said, pulling Alison inside and giving her a quick hug. “It’s freezing today!”

Alison eyed Deirdre as she tried to rearrange the five things she was holding, including a giant bouquet of flowers and a crystal vase. She was wearing espadrilles with three-inch wedge heels, tight pants, and an even tighter T-shirt. Didn’t she just say it was freezing out?

“Where’s Zoey?” Deirdre asked, looking over Alison’s shoulder and out the door.

“She’s not here?” Alison asked, getting an uneasy feeling.

Deirdre’s hazel eyes went wide. “No, honey. I thought she spent the night with you.”

Alison shook her head. “Uh-uh. I haven’t actually seen her since school yesterday.”

The two stood in the front hall, staring at each other mutely. A cell phone ring interrupted the silence.

Chapter Twenty-eight



Tom closed his eyes as the call rang through. He was praying for two things. One: that Deirdre would pick up. And two: that she would be alone.

His father could not catch wind of what was going on with Zoey. Period.

“Tommy, is that you?” Deirdre’s voice sounded worried, but was also music to his ears.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Tom replied. “Is Dad with you?”

“No,” Deirdre answered. “Why? What’s going on? Where’s your sister?”

Tom took a deep breath. “Can you keep a secret?” he asked. It sounded lame even to him. And he almost hung up right then, but didn’t.

"Tommy, tell me what's wrong. Where's Zoey?" Deirdre squeaked.

"She's with me. Sort of," he replied. "Look, Zoey's in trouble, and we need your help." *Deirdre is an adult*, he reminded himself. *And she is family*.

The cute went out of his stepmother's voice. "Where are you?" she asked.

"At the Juvenile Detention Center. It's on —"

"I know where it is," she said. "I'll be there in ten minutes. Tommy? Don't leave her there alone."

I wouldn't, Tom thought. *I won't*. Zoey was only in this mess because she had been looking out for him. He was ready to do the same for her. Heaving a sigh, he closed his phone. Help, for whatever it was worth, was on the way. And his dad was still clueless. So far, so good.

Seven minutes later, Deirdre walked through the front door with Alison right behind her. Both of them looked worried. "Where is she?" Deirdre asked, searching the place as if Tom might be hiding her behind his back.

"She's being questioned, and the guy at the —"

“Never mind,” Deirdre said, stepping up to the front desk and smiling sweetly.

“Officer Ryan,” she cooed. “So sorry to interrupt, but I’m here to pick up my stepdaughter, Zoey Ramirez.”

“She’s being questioned,” Officer Ryan replied. “I’m sure she’ll be —”

“You don’t seem to understand,” Deirdre said, the smile never leaving her face. “I need to pick up Zoey immediately. You see, her father — District Attorney Ramirez — needs her to get ready for his congressional campaign launch party, which is happening this evening.”

Officer Ryan cleared his throat a little nervously. “I’ll see what I can —”

“I’m certain that you can get her right away, Officer. After all, I don’t think there are any formal charges being brought against her, are there?”

The cop looked down, flustered, fumbled a folder, and shook his head.

“And we wouldn’t want the district attorney to be reminded of the fact that you brought in a minor without notifying her parents, or that you’ve been questioning her without giving her

the option of an attorney.” She leaned one arm on the desk and tilted her head coyly. “Would we?”

Another cop, one Tom hadn’t seen before, was suddenly at the desk. “We’re so sorry for any inconvenience, Mrs. Ramirez,” she said. “I’ll go get your daughter right away.”

Tom smiled at the groveling policeman. Deirdre looked like a pampered poodle, but was acting more like a puma. Despite her frosted appearance, she was not to be messed with.

“Looks like I called the right person to help,” Tom whispered to Alison. He wasn’t sure if she was still mad at him for spilling his guts at the worst possible moment, but not talking to her when she was standing right there seemed ridiculous.

“Yeah,” Alison replied, looking up at him with her big blue eyes. “You did.”

Despite her affirming words, Alison looked . . . stressed. And standing so close, both of them worried about someone else — so like their time in Chad’s hospital room — felt a little like taking off a Band-Aid too early. Tom wished

he could offer Alison some comfort, but didn't dare. "It'll be okay," he finally said. *At least Zoey will be*, he added to himself. His sister was a survivor.

Finally, Zoey stepped through a heavy door into the waiting area. She wasn't handcuffed or anything, and the man leading her by the arm didn't seem too agro. But when she got a little closer, Tom saw that Zoey looked terrible. Her eyes were ringed with dark circles and she looked like she'd slept on a bus.

"Oh, honey!" Deirdre exclaimed. All three of them wrapped Zoey in a hug. Tom felt her collapse against them.

"We're terribly sorry about all of this," said the cop who'd led her out. His badge read ALVARADO. "Rest assured that Zoey will not be questioned again. You can consider this matter closed."

"How wise of you," Deirdre said almost harshly. She disentangled herself from the hug, but kept a protective arm around Zoey.

"Let's go," she said, moving Zoey toward the door. She looked back at Tom. "Getting our girl

was the easy part,” she added in a whisper. “We still have to get home and ready for the party without your father knowing about any of this.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw Zoey heave a sigh of relief and whisper, “Thank you,” to their stepmom. Tom felt hugely grateful, too.

Not only did Deirdre have no intention of ratting them out, she was going to help them keep the mess under wraps. That was a good thing. Then there was the bad thing: Their father could smell trouble a mile away.

Chapter Twenty-nine



Zoey slid into the back of her father's SUV between Alison and Tom. In the front, Deirdre was keeping up a steady stream of chatter. Usually Deirdre's babbling annoyed Zoey, but right this second she was grateful for it. Her stepmother's ramblings were the only thing between Zoey and a total breakdown.

"I've been calling you for days," Alison whispered. "Are you okay?"

Am I okay? Zoey repeated to herself. She was totally relieved to hear that her best friend had been trying to call the drowned cell she had not had time to replace, but did not dare speak, or

even look Alison or Tom in the eyes for fear she would really fall apart. It was ironic. She *was* okay. She was totally fine now. And yet safe in the car, surrounded by friends and family, she felt worse than she had an hour ago. Her nerves were jangled. Her legs were shaking.

“All we have to do is get you inside and upstairs. Your father will never know you were gone. Oooh, Tom, maybe you can take her around through the atrium,” Deirdre’s background banter continued. “That way he won’t —”

Beside her, Alison leaned in again. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “For everything.”

Zoey gulped and nodded. If she looked at Alison, it would be all over. “Me too,” she said softly. Never again did she want to feel as isolated as she had last night. Even with Dakota, who turned out to be pretty decent, Zoey had felt utterly alone. She had no intention of taking her friend or her family for granted again anytime soon.

Alison reached over and squeezed Zoey’s hand. Zoey exhaled and tried to steady herself. Little by little, she stopped shaking and her breathing got back to normal. On her other

side, she felt Tom relax, too. He hadn't said much, but she could tell by his expression that he'd been stressing for her. Shared suffering was a twin thing.

"Alison, should we drop you off first?" Deirdre asked, turning to look in the backseat. Alison had offered to take a cab but Deirdre wouldn't hear of it. "It'll just take a sec," she said, wrinkling her nose job.

A few minutes later they had arrived.

Deirdre cooed over the Reeves' place. It was just her style, with a perfectly manicured lawn, shutters, and a pale turquoise door. "What a pretty house!"

"You mean viper pit," Alison said quietly. Zoey knew that the comment was for her benefit — that Alison wanted her to know she wasn't too comfortable at Kelly's. She smiled at her friend, grateful.

"Don't forget your snakebite kit," Zoey cracked. It felt good to smile.

"See you at the party?" Alison gave Zoey a long look and Zoey nodded back, glad Alison was going to be there to help get her over the next hurdle.

“Can’t wait!” Zoey said sarcastically. Tom laughed.

“Me either!” Deirdre chimed — except that she was serious. “This is going to be fun!”

A few minutes later, the Ramirez car was pulling into the circular drive and the plan to go around back had to be scrapped, because Zoey’s dad was waiting on the front porch. “Where have you been?” he thundered before the car even stopped moving.

Zoey stared at her pacing father on the porch. He looked like he was trying to hang himself with the necktie he had looped around his neck and twisted in his hands. He wasn’t even wearing shoes. “You can’t just leave without telling me!” he bellowed, trying to free his finger from the knot he was making around his neck.

Deirdre hopped out of the SUV, scampered over, and kissed Dante’s ruddy cheek. “Sorry, sweetie. It was my idea. I thought the kids could use a little break before the party. We went for pancakes. Here. Let me,” she purred, ignoring his tirade and untangling his tie.

“Why aren’t you getting ready?” Zoey’s dad demanded, scowling at the kids. Tom and Zoey

were trying to slip past unnoticed, without much luck. “You look terrible.” Zoey’s dad put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her before she could get inside. “You look like some sort of delinquent!” He shook his head in disgust.

If he only knew, Zoey thought, running a hand through her tangled hair. It was messy from her restless night. Her makeup was probably all down her cheeks, and her clothes were rumpled.

“Leave her alone, Dad.” Tom pushed between them, protectively forcing their father’s hand off Zoey’s shoulder.

“Oooh. Perfect!” Deirdre interrupted, patting the flawless Windsor knot she had just tied. She gently squared her husband’s face so she could admire him — and his kids could escape. “Sweet pea, you look utterly dashing.” She mock-swooned. Grateful for the distraction, Zoey bolted for the stairs.

“Now let’s get you inside,” Deirdre kept on. “Even with the sunshine, it’s downright chilly out here. I think I can see my breath!”

Deirdre’s voice faded behind the closed door of the bathroom as Zoey turned on the

hot-water tap in the shower. The party was still hours away — her father was getting dressed ridiculously early, which meant he was nervous. But Zoey couldn't wait to get undressed, to strip off her clothes and wash away all the grime and the memories of the previous night. She threw her clothes into a corner and stepped under the hot water. She shivered as the warmth washed over and a sob escaped her throat. Sitting down on the shower floor, Zoey hugged her knees to her chest and let the tears flow.

Twenty minutes later, Zoey emerged, grabbed a clean towel, and dried her eyes. She'd let the tears, the filth, and the horrible feelings from the week spiral away from her down the drain.

She was ready to get ready.

Chapter Thirty



“Talk about déjà vu,” Tom muttered as he entered Silver Spring Country Club that afternoon. He and his family had arrived exactly late enough for everyone to see them waving and smiling their way in. Despite the fact that the decorations were red, white, and blue instead of pink, the mood, the money, and even the guests of honor were exactly the same as they had been at his father’s wedding just a short time before. Round tables were set with the full complement of dishes, silver, and stemware. Patriotic streamers poked out of the floral arrangements. Confetti glittered on the tablecloths.

Only this time, Tom felt different. Yes, he was dressed, pressed, smiling, and making nice while desperately wishing he was somewhere — anywhere — else. But he did not feel out of control. He was still pretty sure his dad was crooked and shouldn't be running for Congress. He still thought his dad was an uptight, overbearing nightmare. And he still had a lot of questions about his father's involvement in his mother's death. But he didn't feel like he was about to explode. He felt calm, like a seasoned gambler with an ace in his pocket.

Maybe it's because of X, Tom thought. He looked at his date standing serenely next to him in a tailored midnight-blue dress, looking beautiful.

Or maybe Tom's new calm was Deirdre's doing. Tom watched his stepmother work the crowd. She was practically stuffed into a red wrap dress with a plunging neckline, tottering on too-tall matching sandals. She'd even had stars emblazoned on her manicure like some sort of Yankee Doodle Ditz. She would have been completely laughable — except that she was surprisingly likable. She flitted around the party, dodging balloons and making everyone

feel welcome, just like at the wedding. Only instead of donning pink feathers, she was smoothing Dante's ruffled ones. She was so nice, she actually made DA Daddy seem nicer, if only by proximity alone.

"You like her, don't you?" X asked when they had settled into a corner of the room. Tom was surprised at the question. He didn't know X had been watching him watch Deirdre.

"Yeah," Tom admitted. "I do. She's a lot smoother than she seems," he tried to explain. "Smarter, too." It sounded funny — describing Deirdre as smart and smooth — especially since she picked that moment to start giggling like a maniac, nearly tip over, and cling to Tom's dad's arm to steady herself.

Tom kept watching as his father shook more hands and accepted checks — the real reason for the launch party. Like practically everything else, politics boiled down to one thing: money. This little get-together was really about raising funds for the long road ahead. And it seemed to be working.

A waiter passed by his dad and stepmom and offered them champagne. Tom's dad grabbed a

glass and swallowed half in one gulp. Deirdre refused.

Now that her morning sickness had seemingly passed, Tom sometimes forgot Deirdre was pregnant. The news of a new baby had not been welcome at first. And now?

Tom felt a weird sensation in his chest, as if his heart were being wrung out like a rag. Deirdre had been nothing but good to him and Zoey. With her piled-up blond hair and bright lipstick, she looked like a trophy wife. But the thing was, she actually *was* a prize. And as much as he hated to admit it, he had to give his father credit for recognizing that.

"She's good for your dad, and for you," X murmured, as if she was reading his mind.

"Yeah, she is," Tom agreed. He watched his dad put a protective arm around his wife. *Maybe he didn't kill Mom*, Tom suddenly thought. *Maybe Mom just wanted to die.*

Zoey was standing next to Deirdre and their dad now, and Deirdre was fixing the collar on Zoey's black dress. Zoey was smiling, and they looked happy together . . . almost like mother and daughter.

When Deirdre was done adjusting her step-daughter's collar, Zoey turned toward the ladies' room.

"Hold that thought," X said, giving Tom's hand a squeeze before letting it go. "I'll be right back." Tom watched X's back disappear into the crowd, then reappear outside the bathroom door that Zoey had just gone through.

"So, are you looking forward to being the son of a congressman?" a gravelly voice barked in Tom's ear.

Tom turned to see a rough-shaven man with a tape recorder and a worn leather bag standing close beside him. A reporter.

"You bet I am," Tom spat out the answer he was trained to give. "I'm proud my father has decided to serve his country." *And not just himself.* In truth, Tom hoped that being a congressman would make his father a better person. It was possible, wasn't it?

"Your dad has some story, huh?" the reporter asked, not looking at Tom. He was watching his father schmooze. "Pulled himself up by his bootstraps — the real American dream. Couldn't have been easy raising you

kids alone after losing his wife in that tragic accident.”

This is it, Tom told himself. This is my chance to leak my theory.

He looked over the reporter’s shoulder to his stepmother, who was smiling widely at his father. And in that instant Tom realized he didn’t want his father to be guilty. He wanted this new configuration of a family to work, to be real.

“He did what he could,” Tom said. “And now we’ve got a new stepmother and a baby brother or sister on the way.” He smiled at the reporter, and knew that the smile was real. He might never know exactly what happened with his mom . . . and that might just be okay.

“Thomas, m’boy! So good to see you!” Senator Bamford’s voice was booming as he clapped Tom on the back. “I wanted to introduce you to my son, Robert.” Tom turned easily toward the senator and shook hands with a pale kid with pimples and an ill-fitting suit. But before he could even begin a conversation, the noise level in the room went way up. There was a huge commotion by the entrance to the club and Tom turned with everyone else to see what the fuss was about.

Chapter Thirty-one



Hovering by the buffet on the lookout for Zoey, Alison picked up a shrimp and dipped it in cocktail sauce. Cucumbers cut in little star shapes surrounded a bowl of red-and-white-swirled dip, and bite-size rectangular raspberry and blueberry jam tartlets made to look like flags sat on pedestal stands waiting for the patriotic munching to begin.

Nibbling on her shrimp, Alison suddenly realized that there was nobody around the food table. And that there was a buzz in the air. Someone important had arrived. Probably her grandmother, or maybe Aunt Christine. Alison could just picture her aunt wallowing in the

throng of flashing cameras and shouted questions.

When the crowd parted and Alison finally got a look at the notable guest, her jaw dropped.

Her mother, Helen Rose, stood in the entrance to the banquet room, Looking Good. She looked a little too good, actually — like she had come straight from the salon. Her auburn hair was freshly cut and styled, and she had a French manicure. Her cream-colored dress and matching shoes were brand-new but perfectly fitted. And prison food was obviously an excellent choice for weight loss.

How did she get out of prison so quickly? Alison wondered as a sick feeling came over her. Because as soon as she was able to stop staring at her mother, she realized that there was someone standing next to her. Helen Rose was arm in arm with another newly arrived guest: Grandmother Diamond.

The sworn enemies stood side by side, like two peas in a pod, smiling broadly and fielding reporters' questions.

"My daughter has been exonerated!" Tamara Diamond declared, beaming.

“How?”

“When did this happen?”

“Helen, over here.”

People were shouting from all sides.

“New evidence came to light,” Alison’s mom explained, smiling at her mother.

Alison had to swallow hard to keep her shrimp down. *New evidence came to light? That’s her explanation?* What Alison’s mom neglected to mention was that the “new evidence” had been brought forward by her — and stolen from Grandmother. And that the evidence implicated Tamara Diamond!

Judging by the thick-as-thieves manner in which her mother and grandmother were standing together, all of that had been forgotten. “The judge overturned the case, and no new charges are being brought at this time,” Helen explained.

Once again the reporters tried to shout over one another. Alison’s mom held out a hand to quiet them, and like a pack of preschoolers, they simmered down just enough that she could be heard.

“I’d like to take this opportunity to say how grateful I am for the support of my family.”

Alison was surprised to see tears in her mother's eyes as she went on. "Where are you all?" her mother asked. She looked out at the crowd, scanning for familiar faces.

Alison stepped back. "Alison?" her mom called, holding a hand toward her. Feeling a little like Frankenstein's monster, Alison obeyed and moved forward on leaden feet. A dozen heavy steps later, Alison was standing before her mother. There was no bulletproof glass between them now. No phone line. No protection.

Her mother hugged her — for the cameras. "Sweetheart. I'm back," she said. Alison forced a smile, keenly aware of the hundreds of eyes on her. Done with her parental PDA, Alison's mom turned back to her audience. "I especially want to thank my mother for supporting me through this ordeal."

Helen and Tamara smiled at each other and the camera shutters clicked.

"And my son."

Alison gulped, watching her mom as she held out both hands to someone lost in the crowd. Jeremy, who Alison had barely noticed in the sea of suits, emerged from the mass of bodies. He

joined them awkwardly in the ring of people. A new buzz ran through the room as reporters racked their brains for some memory of Helen Rose having a son, and then scrambled for more photos when they realized this was new news. The kid was Harris Jones's son!

"Jeremy moved east just to be with me during our difficult time," Helen explained, still holding both of his hands. Her eyes were misty as she dropped his hands to put her arm around him and pull him in between her and Alison.

Jeremy smiled nervously. The cameras flashed. Tamara stood proudly erect while Helen appeared utterly triumphant.

Alison tried not to run as her stomach and her life turned inside out.

Chapter Thirty-two



Even from behind the closed door of the women's bathroom at the Silver Spring Country Club, X could hear the commotion outside. She did not have to open the door to know that the hungry reporters were being served up a delicious and unexpected news treat. X would have loved nothing more than to catch a glimpse of it herself, but right now she was busy.

It had been almost ten minutes since Zoey had gone into one of the stalls. There had been no flush. No swish of lifted skirts. As far as X could tell, Zoey was not even sitting down.

When the only other women in the room — a pair of chattering blue-hairs — finished

touching up their lipstick and hurried out to the ruckus, X delicately lifted herself onto the counter farthest from Zoey's stall. Silently she shifted the large bouquet of lilies and viburnum away from herself, and settled in to wait.

It did not take long. As soon as Zoey thought she was alone, she emerged.

"Oh," X exclaimed. "You scared me!" It was a lie, but X didn't want Zoey to feel ambushed. "I didn't know there was anyone else in here," she said, smiling and swinging her feet.

"Neither did I," Zoey said, scowling at her reflection in the huge mirror.

"I can't stand big parties. Had to get away for a second," X said as she casually looked through the basket of toiletry products offered on the bathroom counter. They had everything from antibacterial wipes to hand cream.

Zoey said nothing but looked at X skeptically.

"You don't like me much, do you?" X asked.

"Me?" Zoey asked. She looked behind her to see if there was someone else there.

"Uh, yeah, you." X grinned like Zoey was joking, but the hard-edged girl hadn't cracked a

smile yet. Taking her cue from that little fact, X got serious. "I'm not like Audra, you know." Zoey flinched. "I would never do anything to hurt your brother." Zoey bit her lip.

Bingo.

There was a long pause. "Right," Zoey finally said. She breathed out a long, slow breath. Then she shook her head. "I guess I do worry about Tom."

"And you should. Not about me and Tom, just Tom. You have to look out for him. I mean, that's what brothers and sisters are for, right?"

Zoey took a gloss out of her clutch and smeared it over her lips. She looked at X for a second and offered it to her.

X took it, hopped off the counter, and applied. "Nice. Thanks." She handed it back. "You going back out?" She gestured toward the door.

"I guess I should . . . before somebody misses me," Zoey said. She almost smiled.

"Or before we miss something," X added, holding open the door and keeping her look resigned. Inside she was grinning. Zoey's shell was tough, but she had finally cracked it.

Chapter Thirty-three



Jeremy stood in the main room of the country club and hoped that the smile plastered across his face didn't make him look like a cartoon character. On his right stood his half sister, Alison. To his left were his mother and grandmother. In front of him were at least a dozen reporters shouting questions, as well as everybody who was anybody in Silver Spring.

This was not quite the family moment he had always imagined. This was more like a soap opera. Or a freak show. His eyes scanned the room for Zoey, and he smiled when they found her. Zoey was the one bright spot in this sea of weirdness, especially in a simple black dress.

Helen Rose took a half step forward and raised her voice to begin what sounded like a well-rehearsed “impromptu” speech. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to be back in the arms of my family,” she stated. “It has been a tough road. And from here a new journey begins.”

Jeremy listened as his mom told her rapt audience about her plans to rebuild her home-making empire and restore her good name.

Turning slightly toward Alison, Jeremy talked through his pasted-on smile. “I thought this was a *campaign* launch party,” he said softly enough that only Alison could hear.

For a second Alison didn’t respond. Then she leaned closer. “Didn’t you know? It’s all about ‘Looking Good’ . . . *all* the time.”

“I’m getting that,” Jeremy said, nodding slightly. Alison’s smile looked genuine now as she resumed her photo pose. But, Jeremy noticed, near the back of the room, DA Ramirez’s smile was definitely not.

The DA appeared to be gritting his teeth. If his wife had not been holding his arm, he might have charged the crowd, ringing Jeremy’s new-found family and knocking them all down like

bowling pins. His limelight had been stolen, and the only person paying him any attention was his wife.

And Tamara Diamond.

With an almost-imperceptible brush of Helen's sleeve, Tamara silenced her daughter and drew the attention of the entire room.

"Thank you, my dear." She nodded at Helen. "Nobody is more eager than I to see you return your business to its former glory — and beyond. But speaking of glory" — Tamara lifted a slender hand and beckoned Dante from the back of the room — "I would like to direct everyone's attention to the man who has brought us all here tonight. Our illustrious district attorney, a good man, a good friend, and Maryland's next congressman . . . Dante Ramirez!"

There was a smattering of applause as the DA walked forward and took Tamara's hand, shaking it firmly, ever smiling like a good politician.

"To assure that Dante has a smooth ride to Washington, I would like to contribute this small token of my esteem." A check passed hands. Jeremy noticed that although he was trying not to look at it, the DA could not help himself. His

eyebrows went up at the sight of the figure and his pinched smile disappeared, replaced by a happier, hungrier look.

"Now, let's enjoy the party, shall we?" Tamara said graciously, acting the host. "And don't forget to give generously," she reminded everyone.

Jeremy was impressed by the way the slim, seemingly frail Tamara Diamond handled the crowd. She told them just what to think and do without their knowing it. Not one of them seemed to question her, and several people pulled out checkbooks on the spot.

Watching in awe, Jeremy almost let Alison slip away.

"Hey, wait up," he called, dipping between two suits in the crowd. "What's the rush?"

"I just want to get away from the reporters," Alison said as she made her way toward a less-crowded corner. "I don't feel like talking."

"Gotcha," Jeremy said, following. "No reporters. How about brothers?"

Alison looked over her shoulder skeptically. "That depends," she said. "How nice are they?"

"Very nice," Jeremy shot back. "And very sorry."

“Really? Sorry?” Alison sat down at one of the unattended tables. There was a sparkle in her eyes. She was joking with him! Jeremy felt relieved.

This was more like it. This was what he had imagined having a sister would be like — someone to complain with at parties, and tease and talk to.

“On a sorry scale of one to ten, I would say this brother’s at an eight.” Jeremy sat down across from Alison. He stopped smiling. “Seriously, Alison, I wish I had told you that I knew you were my sister sooner. And Zoey, too.” He quickly scanned the room for her — he had to track her down next. “It wasn’t fair for me to keep it all a secret.”

From out of nowhere, Kelly appeared and laid her head on Jeremy’s shoulder. She had been listening in. “Maybe so,” she cooed, “but who wants to play fair?”

Chapter Thirty-four



Kelly slid into one of the empty chairs surrounding the little table and smiled at Jeremy. “You can’t have Jeremy all to yourself, Al,” she announced. “He and I have some catching up to do, too.” She took Alison’s scowl as a sign that her descent upon them was an interruption, but noticed that her male cousin almost seemed . . . bemused.

“Can you believe Auntie Helen got sprung so quickly? Her Highness must have pulled some serious strings. But what I can’t wrap my head around is, why? Why would Grandmother get your mom out now?” Kelly looked toyingly at her cousins.

Alison rolled her eyes. “Like we’ll ever know,” she said grimly, taking a glass of sparkling juice off a cocktail waitress’s passing tray. “Actually, I’m not even sure I *want* to know.”

Kelly tried not to be disappointed that Al wasn’t serving up the inside scoop. But maybe she could brighten the mood with a little tidbit of her own. “Really? I’d love to know what those two masterminds have cooked up. In the meantime, I have a little info to share.”

Alison shot her a “let’s hear it” look, and Kelly spilled like an overfilled dam.

“You know that little box in your room?” she asked. “The one we found the birth certificate in? *Your* birth certificate,” she said, shooting Jeremy a look. “Well, apparently your mother gave it to mine for safekeeping ages ago. It’s just been sitting there for years.”

Alison’s eyes widened at this bit of news — or so Kelly thought.

“Kelly,” a smooth voice behind her interrupted Kelly’s gossip sesh. Kelly whirled to see who it was. Aunt Helen!

“You look well, dear,” her aunt said, sounding forced. “I’ve missed you. But I just came over

because I wanted to thank you for taking such good care of Alison while I was away. It meant so much to all of us.”

Kelly tried not to flinch at her aunt Helen’s comment. She didn’t know if she was trying to be sarcastic or not, but she resisted the urge to wipe the smug look off the immaculately styled woman’s face. She hadn’t missed Aunt Helen — not for a second.

Chapter Thirty-five



Momentarily safe at the buffet table, Alison stuffed another shrimp into her mouth and watched her mother, her brother, and her cousin carefully. She'd bolted as soon as she could after her mother had arrived. Jeremy had tried to follow, but Helen had touched his arm and he had stayed. He was tethered — at least for the moment — and looked utterly uncomfortable. Kelly just looked annoyed.

“Hey, you all right?” Zoey stepped up beside Alison. She eyed the food but didn't take any.

Alison turned to her friend. “No,” she said with a sigh. “But I think I will be. You?” Alison

peered at her friend, hoping to get a read. But Zoey had her game face on.

“Ditto.”

Both girls turned their attention to Alison’s mother. She’d been gone for so long that her presence almost seemed like a weird mirage. Alison double-dipped a shrimp for strength. “Be back in a sec,” she said, moving away from her friend.

After wiping her fingers and mouth on a cocktail napkin, Alison felt as ready as she was going to get. “You look wonderful, Mother,” she said, touching her mom’s sleeve. It was a trick her mom had taught her. It made people at parties feel more connected and intimate. It assured the speaker of undivided attention. “And it’s so nice to see you with Grandmother.” She smiled and waited to see if her mother would offer a word of explanation about the apparently forgotten eighteen-year feud.

“Thank you, Alison,” her mom said, gingerly pulling away from her daughter’s light touch.

Alison fumed inwardly. That was it. That was *it*? Well, if she wasn’t going to offer any

information, Alison was going to go digging for it. “So, have the two of you made up?”

“Are you back on the list?” Kelly butted in, her eyes full of mischief. Alison tried not to smirk, pleased as she was that her cousin was helping to stir *this* pot.

Alison’s mother fixed Kelly with a “who do you think you are?” stare and handed her niece her empty highball. “Be a darling and get your favorite aunt a refill, would you? San Pellegrino with a twist of lime. Oh, and could you get one for Alison, too?” The question was an order. *How Tamara*, Alison noted.

Clearly disgruntled, Kelly shoved her chair back and stood up. Then, with a small twinkle in her eyes, she grabbed Jeremy’s hand. “Come on, cuz,” she said, pulling him to his feet and dragging him away. Again, Alison was grateful to Kelly. She was ready to confront her mom regardless of who was watching. But she wasn’t sure how much of the family business Jeremy was ready to see.

“How did Mr. Ramirez get you out so quickly?” Alison asked as soon as Kelly was out of earshot.

Helen eyed her own mother, who was making small talk on the other side of the room. The smile on her face looked pinched. "I told you, he owed me a favor, and I don't want to ta —"

"Well, I *do* want to talk about it," Alison said firmly. "You said he owed *Grandmother* a favor, not you. I don't understand why Grandmother would use a favor on you. And what's with the buddy-buddy act?" Alison could feel her heart pounding and her face growing warm. She was sure her cheeks were bright pink. It suddenly occurred to her that the DA's favor for her grandmother was making sure the old woman was not implicated. Still, it was not clear why Grandmother would also help her mom, or how her mom could have known she would.

Her mother's expression remained fixed. "She offered me a deal," she said flatly.

That was not the response she was expecting. "What kind of deal?" Alison asked. "Is that what she came to talk to you about when you were in prison?" *And since when did you start negotiating?*

Helen nodded. "Yes. Your grandmother offered me an exchange for my freedom."

Alison shook her head slightly. That made no sense. “What could she want from you?” Alison’s grandmother didn’t “need” anything. She held all the cards. Had all the power. All the money. What could she possibly want?

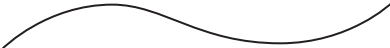
Helen’s blue eyes met her daughter’s. “She wants me to launch a new magazine, *Diamond Life*,” she said, sounding a little exasperated.

Alison tried not to smirk as she pondered just what the subject matter of the magazine would be. One thing was for sure: It wouldn’t bother with the truth.

“And you agreed?” Alison asked. She couldn’t imagine her mother and grandmother working together — on anything.

Helen’s mouth was set in a grim line. “I did,” was all she said.

Chapter Thirty-six



Zoey smiled as she watched Kelly bring drinks over to her aunt and cousin. It was about time the girl did something for someone else.

Suddenly hungry, Zoey turned around to grab a spanakopita triangle and saw her father's assistant whispering something in his ear. Glaring abruptly at his daughter, the DA excused himself from the conversation he'd been having and left the room. Not a good sign.

"Zoey," a low voice said softly. Distracted by her father's quick departure, Zoey wheeled around and found herself face-to-face with Jeremy.

“Jeremy,” Zoey said, trying to keep her voice light. He was standing really close. “Is this a weird scene or what?”

“Totally weird.” Jeremy grimaced. He looked down at her with those blue eyes. “I’m glad you’re here. . . . There’s something I wanted to tell you.”

Zoey felt her cheeks flush as she waited for him to go on. He seemed to be searching for the right words.

“I can’t tutor you anymore,” he blurted.

That was it?

“It’s just not working out for me,” he added.

Zoey’s heart sank. If he didn’t tutor her, she would never get to see him alone! “But I —”

Jeremy smiled and stepped a little closer. “Let me finish,” he said. “It’s not working out for me because I’d rather do other stuff.”

Zoey was about to pull away when he reached out and laced his fingers through hers.

“With you,” he finished. His eyes were twinkling.

Zoey felt a giant smile spread across her face as she looked up at this guy she was crazy about.

She was about to suggest that they get out for some air when her dad reappeared out of nowhere. Ignoring Jeremy, he grabbed her elbow — hard — and steered her out of the room. Zoey gave Jeremy a panicked look as she was dragged away. This was like a recurring nightmare!

Sticking with the interrogation theme, her dad led Zoey into a small room and closed the door. “Are you trying to single-handedly destroy my career?” he demanded. “I just got a call,” he growled, “and an earful all about your little night down at the JDC.” He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his daughter like she was a parasite.

I’m fine, Dad, really, Zoey thought sarcastically. *Hanging out at juvie was pretty good entertainment for a Friday night.* Didn’t he care about her side of the story at all?

“Why are you mad at me? I didn’t kill Audra,” Zoey said quietly, glaring. “This isn’t my fault.”

“You fool,” her father sighed with disgust. “Haven’t you learned anything? It’s not about Audra. It’s about being too foolish to protect yourself from the Wilsons.”

Zoey hated it when her father was right. And this time he was. She should not have let herself be taken in by the Wilsons.

She was staring at the floor, fuming, when the door opened and Deirdre stepped into the room. “Dante, sweetie, it’s time for your little speech,” she said, shooting Zoey a sympathetic look. “Are you two about finished? I don’t want to interrupt a father-daughter moment.”

Dante nodded and pushed past Deirdre without looking back at Zoey. She was dismissed. Zoey felt like she was five years old. One of these days, her father might actually be finished with her for good.

Chapter Thirty-seven



Jeremy pulled into his grandmother's driveway and drove the quarter mile up to the house. It was a gorgeous early-winter day with a cloudless azure sky and only a slight chill in the air. He'd just gotten off the phone with Zoey, and they were going out tomorrow night—their first real date. All in all, things were pretty great. And yet Jeremy was filled with apprehension. He had the distinct impression that his first Diamond family brunch was not going to be warm, cozy, or relaxed.

Breathe, he told himself as he closed his car door and walked across the agate driveway. He'd come to Maryland to connect with his mother

and sister, and was now smack in the middle of the Diamond web. He just hoped he had better prospects than the usual housefly.

“Good morning, Mister Jones,” the butler greeted him. “Your grandmother is in the dining room, seeing to last-minute preparations. May I take your coat?”

Jeremy shrugged out of his merino-wool overcoat and handed it over, keeping an eye out for Alison. He’d just as soon steer clear of his grandmother for now.

“And Alison?” he inquired.

“In the library, I believe,” the butler replied.

Jeremy made a beeline for the library and found his sister sitting in front of the fire, talking on her phone. He smiled and waved, but she made no move to finish up her conversation. Jeremy considered leaving, then sat down across from her instead. She couldn’t escape him that easily.

“Do tell,” Alison said. She sounded kind of excited. “Seriously.” She gave Jeremy a “what gives?” look.

Jeremy shrugged. “I need to talk to you,” he mouthed.

Alison screwed her lips up in an exaggerated pout. Then she held up a finger. "You'll have to tell me your news when we're shopping, Zoey," she said into the phone. "Apparently my *brother* has something really important to say."

Ouch. At least she was smiling, a little. Jeremy hoped the sarcasm was Alison's sense of humor and not anger coming through. She snapped her phone closed and looked at him, waiting. "So . . ." she asked.

"So I just wanted to make sure that we're all right," he said, trying not to sound desperate. He hadn't been part of the family for very long but could already tell that he was going to need a serious ally. And Alison was the best choice.

"All right?" Alison echoed skeptically. "All right," she said again, as if trying it out.

"Look, Alison, I really am sorry I didn't tell you who I was before. But Mom was adamant that she be the one to do it. And from where I was standing, it really did seem like you sent her to jail. I get now that it's way more complicated, and that I was out of line. I'm just learning about Hel — Mom, and the whole family. And there's a lot to learn."

“You got that right, at least,” Alison agreed.
“And just when you think —”

The library door opened and Grandmother Diamond appeared. “I see you two are getting acquainted. How nice. We’re so glad you’ve joined the family, Jeremy — aren’t we, Alison?” She smiled.

Alison smiled back. “Certainly,” she agreed.

Jeremy could not tell if either of them meant a word of what they were saying.

“Come, children. It is time to adjourn to the dining room.” Tamara Diamond led the way, followed by Jeremy and then Allison.

“Get ready for the ride of your life,” Jeremy heard Alison whisper over his shoulder and this time, he knew, she meant it.

Chapter Thirty-eight



Kelly pulled her chair out from the carved dining table and sat down with a sense of anticipation. As much as she hated family brunches, this one was sure to be interesting.

Taking a sip of water, Kelly watched her grandmother enter the room, followed by Jeremy and Alison. The brother-and-sister pair seemed to be at peace with each other — a mild disappointment, but no surprise. Alison could never stay mad at anyone for very long.

While Kelly's mother pulled out Grandmother's chair at the head of the table and the matriarch took her seat, Aunt Helen entered the room and claimed the chair at the other

end of the table. Interesting. Kelly hadn't even noticed that the place had been set, probably because it *never* was. She'd often wondered if the empty second throne belonged to her dead grandfather — apparently not. Apparently the seat belonged to Tamara's oldest child.

"Good morning, everyone," Helen greeted as if she'd been there every Sunday for the last ten years. "How are you today, Mother?" she asked. Was that semisweet tone supposed to be for real?

"Just fine, Helen," Grandmother replied. "Never better, in fact." She smiled at her daughter while a disgruntled Phoebe took her place filling a spot to the left of Aunt Helen.

But wait. Kelly quickly counted seats and people. There was an empty seat to Aunt Helen's right. What was that about?

While Francesca served poached eggs and salmon, Tamara tapped the handle of her butter knife on her crystal goblet. "I have an announcement," she said, pausing momentarily to make sure she had everyone's attention. "I'll be leaving in the morning on a short cruise — I've chartered a yacht. The last few months have left

me simply exhausted, and I've decided that a few weeks away is just what the doctor ordered."

Kelly exchanged looks with Alison. Since when did Grandmother Diamond stoop to having actual feelings about what was going on around her? Or need a vacation? "She looks okay to me," Kelly mouthed, smirking.

While her family digested the news, Kelly helped herself to a piece of salmon from Francesca's platter and added some fresh fruit. Spooning up a bite, she caught sight of someone standing in the doorway. She choked and spit a bite of half-chewed fish onto her plate (gross). Uncle Jack!

"Sorry I'm late," Jack Rose said, as if he had only been out parking the car. Alison was on her feet in half a second. Without asking to be excused, she ran to her father with her arms wide open for a hug. He swooped her up, lifting her feet off the floor.

Next she'll be asking him to push her on the swings, Kelly thought, feeling a pang of jealousy. Nobody hugged her like that. Ever. Her mom might have, if she'd let her. But she and her dad

had never been close the way Alison and Uncle Jack were.

Uncle Jack set Alison down and went over to greet his mother-in-law, the hostess, who allowed him to kiss her lightly on the cheek. Impressive. As he straightened, he spotted his wife sitting at the end of the table. Kelly felt like she was watching dogs approach each other. Nobody was growling, but the fur on their necks was definitely up. Smiling nervously, Jack approached his wife. But before he got halfway there, he spotted Jeremy.

Oh, boy, Kelly thought.

“What is he doing here?” Jack asked. His surprise — and his anger — were immediately apparent. Clearly he knew who Jeremy was.

“He’s having brunch with his family, of course,” Grandmother Diamond replied evenly. She eyed her son-in-law, daring him to make a fuss. Uncle Jack seemed to remember his place immediately, the good little puppy that he was. Kelly watched him unruffle his fur and obey.

“Yes, of course,” he corrected himself. Contrite, he kissed his wife on the cheek and sat down in the empty seat. Kelly looked at the four

of them sitting together — Helen, Jack, Alison, and Jeremy. The Roses, together for the first time.

Wow. Kelly had to keep herself from shaking her head. She hoped, for his sake, that Jeremy had thorns he wasn't showing. Otherwise the boy was a goner.

Chapter Thirty-nine



Back in her grandmother's library, Alison stared at her parents. Just half an hour before, she'd been filled with joy about her father's return — about their chance to rebuild their family. Every ounce of that joy was already gone.

Helen and Jack Rose stood in front of the fireplace, half facing each other and arguing. It was just like old times, only worse.

"How could you just leave, Jack?" Helen hissed. Her nostrils were flared, a sure sign that she was furious. "I was hoping you could handle things for at least a *little* while."

Alison studied her dad's face. She knew the expression well, and was sad to see it again so

soon. Her father looked helpless. “I didn’t know what to do, Helen,” he tried to explain. “Phoebe told me it would be best for Alison and your trial if I went away. I was out of control — we both knew that. So I thought Phoebe might be right. She said it was what *you* would want. And when I went home to get my bags, they’d been packed for me — and everything was gone.

“But I did what you asked,” he continued pleadingly. “If you hadn’t already told me about the key, it would have been gone, too.” Her father’s eyes were glistening, but her mother looked unmoved. “Maybe I should have stayed. I know I should have done better. But I was lost without you. . . .”

Though Alison was standing just a few feet away, her parents didn’t seem to notice her. *Things change and things stay the same*, she thought sadly. She was still invisible to them.

“You shouldn’t have left Alison,” Helen insisted, staring her husband down and talking in a whisper. “You should have known how quickly Mother would —”

“I can’t be responsible for keeping all the strands of your web untangled, Helen,” Alison’s

dad interrupted hotly. Inside, Alison did a little cheer. She *so* wanted her father and her mother to be equals, or at least partners. The more her dad stood up to her mom, the better — even if deep down, she wished he'd been strong enough to stick by her, too.

The tension in the room was thick in the ensuing silence. Alison wished she could break it, to help the two of them see that what was done was done. That moving forward and rebuilding their family was what mattered now.

She was so focused on her parents that Alison didn't see Jeremy step into the room. Suddenly he was there between her mom and dad, grabbing Jack's hand and looking up at him warmly.

"I, uh, I . . . just wanted to say that it's nice to finally meet you," Jeremy said a little sheepishly. "And I wanted to say, um, thanks, thanks for welcoming me. I know my timing isn't great."

"Oh, Jeremy, your timing is just fine." Alison watched her mother wrap Jeremy in what appeared to be a genuine embrace. She felt a sharp pang of jealousy, followed by an awful shudder. Her father looked as pained as she felt. Helen Rose rarely hugged . . . anyone.

Chapter Forty



“You won’t believe it!” Zoey blurted as soon as she climbed into the cab. She didn’t even try to keep the smile off her face — she was too excited, and too happy. And not just because the launch party was over and she was going on a shopping expedition with her best friend.

“Believe what?” Alison asked with a straight face. “That my brother is your new boyfriend?”

Zoey could feel her face growing hot. “What?! He told you?” Zoey whacked her friend on the arm, but was too happy to be truly offended.

“No, but I saw the two of you at the launch party. It was pretty clear what was going on.”

“I was so surprised,” Zoey said quietly, looking out the window.

“Why? Zoey, you’re amazing. Anyone who spends five minutes with you can tell that. I just can’t believe you’re dating my brother!” She giggled.

“We’re not dating yet,” Zoey pointed out.

“Maybe not technically,” Alison admitted. “But I can tell he really likes you.”

Zoey beamed in spite of herself. For the first time since she could remember, she felt like the luckiest girl in the world — at least as far as boys were concerned.

The cabdriver dropped them off in front of their favorite department store and the girls hurried inside.

“I have news, too,” Alison said as they got off the escalator on the third floor and began to peruse the racks. “We’re moving back into our house as soon as Mother gets the new furniture delivered.” She pulled a size-small sweater out of a folded stack and held it up.

“Where are you staying until then?” Zoey asked. She hoped her voice did not betray her

hope that Alison would *not* be at Kelly's house any longer.

"We're shacking up with Grandmother." Alison made a face at her reflection in the mirror. The color of the rough-spun sweater — a burnt orange — was all wrong for her. "Uch." She piled it back on the stack. Zoey wasn't sure whether the disgust was for the sweater or being back at Tamara's estate.

"Home sweet home?" Zoey joked.

"Exactly," Alison murmured. "Mother and Grandmother under one roof . . . who would have thought? But they aren't fighting, exactly. They're too busy debating the details of their new magazine, *Diamond Life*. And at least I am out from under Aunt Phoebe . . . and can get a little space from Kelly."

Zoey wondered if Alison had made the Kelly comment for her benefit. She and Alison had not talked about her since their fight, and at the moment Zoey had no desire to bring the argument — or Kelly — up. She had no intention of letting Alison go down the Kelly path again. But for right now, she was too happy to have her best friend back to worry about it.

“So what about Jeremy?” Zoey asked, hoping she wouldn’t blush all over again. “How’s he fitting into the picture? I mean, with your dad back and all?”

“Oh!” Alison rolled her eyes. “It’s like I went from no family to giant family in a week — and not to get ahead of ourselves — but what if you ended up my sister-in-law?!”

“I know,” Zoey squealed quietly. “But seriously. Let’s not get all carried away. Our families are complicated enough without combining them. Can you actually imagine what that would be like?”

Alison’s eyes got big and she shook her head. “You’re right. Let’s not go there. On the day-to-day front, it’s great having Jeremy there and Dad back — they take the focus off of me — and so far everyone is playing nice. Dad even told Jeremy he was welcome anytime.” Alison paused. “I think he was trying to impress Mom. I heard her telling him ‘the door would always be open.’ But, amazingly, I think she really means it. Do you think jail could have turned her into a sap?”

Zoey laughed. “No way.” Secretly she hoped Helen was at least being honest — and that

Jeremy would take advantage of the Roses' open-door policy. Alison deserved to have a few trustworthy family members. "Jail doesn't make you soft. It hardens you."

"As if." Alison scowled. "That woman is titanium. So how are things at your house? Post-party, I mean?" Alison moved from the sweaters to a rack of distressed blazers. "This color would be good on you." She held up a skinny jacket with frayed cuffs in an olive drab. "Ew. The buttons. . ." They were too big and all wrong for the coat. Zoey nodded her agreement and Alison hung the reject back up.

"Things are okay, I guess. Deirdre's being cool. And nothing cheers Dad up like campaign checks!" Zoey feebly joked. Truth be told, he scowled every time he saw her.

"I can't believe he's blaming you for what the Wilsons did!" Alison pulled a coat on and walked over to a floor-length mirror to check it out. It looked good. She kept it on.

"I know, right? Like it's my fault they lured me in." Zoey *wished* she had been able to see through the Wilsons, but also didn't. Her dad didn't trust anyone, and she had no desire to live

life like that. She wanted to think people were good. Innocent until proven guilty. Mistrust had made her come *that close* to throwing a wall up between her and Jeremy. “Sometimes I wish I could toss Dad and the Wilsons off a bridge!” Zoey said, doing a mock drop punt. “They’re all nuts.”

Alison laughed, agreeing. “I’m gonna get this,” she said, shedding the jacket. “Want anything?”

“Nah.” Zoey was too distracted to really shop. She ran her hand over a cashmere sweater. “I looked at the file again last night,” she said in a softer voice. Alison turned around, her face filled with concern.

“You just said the Wilsons are nuts. Why are you torturing yourself with that file?”

“Well, because they *are* crazy. But so was my mom. I mean, she was depressed. And I think Dr. Wilson really helped her — at least for a while — but then —” Zoey felt her voice break. Why couldn’t she let her mother’s depression and death go? Why couldn’t she move on? She could feel the tears welling up and dropped her head in embarrassment.

Alison didn't miss a beat. She grabbed two dresses and pushed Zoey toward the changing room.

The attendant let them into the largest room, hanging the dresses on the rail where they were all but forgotten. The second the door was closed, Alison gently but firmly grabbed her friend's shoulders. "Zoey Ramirez, I want you to listen to me," Alison said firmly. "Your mom's death was not your fault, and neither was Audra's. There was nothing you could do to prevent what happened."

That did it. Zoey could not hold it in any longer. The tears that had been threatening spilled from her eyes, down her cheeks, and onto Alison's sweater. She cried silently, letting her friend hold her until every drop of pent-up sadness was out.

Chapter Forty-one



Tom poked at the falafel in his pita. The lunch ladies at Stafford must have needed a vacation. They had been on a Mediterranean kick, and he was along for the ride. Alone. Glancing around the A-list table, he saw that nobody else had picked up the special.

Except X. She sat down beside Tom and licked a little hummus off her finger. “Too much garlic,” she announced. Tom didn’t bother to hide his smile.

A second later Alison and Zoey sidled up. Alison sat down next to Kelly. There was a spot on the other side of the blond, but the look on Zoey’s face made it pretty clear that his sister wasn’t going anywhere near it.

“Plenty of room here.” X slid closer to Tom, clearing a spot opposite Alison. Tom could have kissed her. Almost the whole gang was gathered now — and so far things were peaceful.

“Did you guys see this?” X pulled the morning paper out of her bag.

“Oh, not that!” Alison threw her hand up like she was a vampire caught in a sunbeam. Helen Rose — smiling like the proverbial cat that ate the canary — was splashed across the front page with a big caption that read **LOOKING UP**.

“No, this,” X said with a twinkle in her eyes, opening to another page. When she found what she was looking for, she spread the newspaper out across the table. A large color photo of the whole Ramirez family, smiling and waving after Tom’s dad’s speech on Saturday, filled the top of the right-hand side.

“See it? We live with it!” Tom rolled his eyes. Zoey nodded in agreement and made a gagging face at the picture.

“I think it would be so interesting to be part of a political family,” X said thoughtfully, scanning the article.

You have no idea, Tom thought. But he was beginning to get the feeling that he may as well get used to it — and that there might even be a couple of perks.

“Me, too,” Chad agreed, slipping into the spot beside Kelly and setting his laden tray on top of the paper. He had piled his plate with a hamburger, fries, pie, Jell-O, cheese, and a huge bunch of grapes.

“Hungry ever?” Tom asked.

“It’s the steroids.” Chad laughed. “I had no idea how hungry they would make me. I get them with the chemo. They’re supposed to keep up my strength and appetite.”

“Don’t let your football buddies know,” Tom joked. He was happy to see his friend chowing down and looking strong. Hodgkin’s could be hard to beat, but Tom felt confident that Chad was up for the challenge.

Chapter Forty-two



Alison spooned up a bite of yogurt as she listened to Chad and Tom banter about lunchroom food and the freshman cheerleader who had started accompanying Chad on doctor visits.

“Nice move.” Tom nodded. “Bring your own candy striper.”

Chad laughed and defended Angela. “She’s not *that* young. And she’s really smart. We study together sometimes while I wait.”

“Full service.” Tom laughed again. “Way to work it!”

Alison was glad to hear that Chad was getting some help. His chemo treatments would not be

easy, and he'd need all the support he could get. She felt a little bad that she didn't reciprocate the romantic feelings he felt for her, but knew she couldn't lie. She would always care about him and be there as a friend, but that was all she could offer. And happily, Chad had stopped giving her moony looks.

"I can't eat this," Tom suddenly said, getting to his feet. "I'll be right back."

"Get me some extra ketchup!" Chad called out.

Gazing around the A-list table, Alison realized that, by lunchroom standards at least, things were pretty much back to normal. For the first time in a long time, she was truly happy to be back there. And for better or for worse, these people were her friends — except for maybe Kelly — and with a little luck, they would be for a long time to come.

"Give me those," Kelly said, swiping a bunch of grapes off her tray and popping one into her mouth.

"Get your own," Alison replied smoothly as she grabbed them right back and gingerly set

them on the far side of her tray — out of Kel's reach. She raised an eyebrow at her blond cousin, who smirked and got back to flirting with Trent, the captain of the football team and the latest target in her sights. Alison silently wished the boy luck. He didn't stand a chance!

Across the table, Zoey rolled her eyes at Kelly's antics, and Alison raised her eyebrows in agreement. She was glad to see that Zoey didn't look mad — just mildly irritated, and maybe even a little amused.

Thank goodness, Alison thought. Zoey and Kelly would never be friends, but Alison needed Zoey to be a little bit more accepting of her cousin. Zoey was her BFF for sure, but Kelly would always be part of her life, part of her family.

She eyed Kelly warily as the girl shot Trent a few of her irresistible looks. Now that Alison had learned — the hard way — that you always had to be on your guard with Kelly, she was pretty sure she was up for dealing with her cousin. In fact, Alison had discovered that she liked standing up for herself — it felt good, and

she knew with truth on her side, she would always be strong enough.

“Whoa! What’s all this?” X leaned away from the table, dumbfounded, and everyone turned to see what she was looking at.

“He can’t help it, he’s addicted,” Zoey explained as Tom returned to the table with several boxes of Lucky Charms and several more cartons of milk. “No Cap’n Crunch?” she teased her brother.

“All out,” he pouted as he started opening boxes and dumping the cereal into a bowl. He added the milk with a flourish.

Zoey reached around X for the spoon and scooped the first bite into her mouth. “Mmmmmm,” she teased.

“Hey, get your own spoon!” Tom said, slapping his sister playfully and wrenching the utensil from her grasp.

Alison laughed. Since her crying jag in the dressing room, Zoey had seemed happier, more peaceful. *Maybe she just needed to let all that stuff go*, Alison thought. *Or maybe Jeremy is causing her smile*. Whatever the reason, Alison was

thrilled to see a sparkle back in her friend's dark eyes.

Alison's gaze moved from Zoey to Tom, who was now extolling the virtues of sugared breakfast cereal into X's ear. Seeing Tom and X together was still tough — Alison would always wonder what might have been between them. But a little time on her own — without a boyfriend — would be good. And, she had to admit, Tom seemed happier than he had in a long time. She just hoped that someday *she* would have a chance to make him happy.

She wouldn't tell anyone that, of course — not even Zoey.

It would just be her little secret.

Take a peek at

MAKING A SPLASH,

a new trilogy!

Splash. Basically, it was a little twelve-inch-deep wading pool at the bottom of a winding slide. At the top, water swirled through a very shallow pool and over the slide. Nearby was a large mesh container that contained inner tubes. We grabbed a tube and put it at the top of the four-foot-high slide. A kid wearing a life preserver climbed onto it. Then we gently pushed him off the landing and he glided toward the water.

Splash!

Another lifeguard — and sometimes a parent if the kiddos were really small — stood near the bottom of the slide but within easy reach just

in case a child toppled. But that rarely happened. It was the shortest slide in the park, specially designed to give the little tykes a safe thrill.

It wasn't very challenging work, but then my concern wasn't the work so much as the supervisor. I really didn't want Sean judging me. Caitlin was right. It would be weird.

I'd gone to the locker room, found my locker, and changed into my uniform — a red tank bathing suit and red visor. I had a whistle draped around my neck. My red hip-pack was buckled securely. Attached to it was my park photo ID. Lying off to the side, a little away from the water, but within easy reach, was my red rescue tube. I was prepared. Totally.

But still, the excitement factor here was going to be negative twenty and falling faster than someone shooting down the Bermuda Triangle — which was almost a total vertical drop until the slide suddenly wasn't anymore and you were, like, hurtling through the air, before you disappeared into the twelve-foot pool beneath you.

Big difference between twelve inches and twelve feet — not to mention the guys who hang out at each one. As much as I hated to admit it, because it made me seem so shallow — pun intended — I was disappointed in the guy factor here. I'd thought it would be fun to work someplace where I was paid to keep an eye on cute guys.

“Hey.”

I looked over. A blond guy in red swim trunks and a visor that matched mine walked over and placed his hands on his hips. He was cute in a chipmunk kind of way. He had really puffy cheeks when he smiled, and he was smiling now.

“Hi,” I said.

“I'm Nick.”

“Robyn.” The conversationally challenged, apparently.

He looked around. “So who did we tick off to get this gig, huh?”

I laughed, not sure what to say to that. I mean, yeah, it was a lousy job but complaining wasn't going to change anything.

“Have you worked here before — at the park, I mean?” he asked.

I shook my head. "First time."

"Me, too. So maybe it's just a matter of working our way up to the cool rides."

"Maybe." But if that was the case, then Caitlin would be suffering beside me. Although, technically, she wasn't at a ride.

"I spent a lot of time here last summer," Nick said. "It all looks different, though."

"You spent time in the kiddie area?"

He laughed. He had a great laugh, and I thought working with him could be fun. He seemed easy to talk to.

"No way. Never even got close. Nah, I don't know what it is. Maybe it's just because there's no one here yet."

Well, except for the employees, of course. But I guess we didn't count.

I caught sight of Sean swaggering in our direction. He was in his red Paradise Falls swim trunks, with a whistle draped around his neck, tapping against his bare chest. His attention was focused on the girl walking beside him. They were talking, he was smiling. He never smiled at me like that.

As they got closer, I recognized her. She was the blond I'd noticed earlier, the one who'd been sitting by herself, looking bored. She was decked out in the official Paradise Falls uniform and had her hair pulled back now. So I guess she wasn't a supermodel. She was just like the rest of us.

Sean pointed toward me, said something that made her smile and made me suddenly feel self-conscious. What was there to say about me?

He led her over. She was smaller than I was. Slender. Petite. Her large, really dark-lensed sunglasses made it look like she was trying to hide.

"Hey, Robyn, Nick, this is Whitney. She's going to work at Splash."

Apparently, she needed a personal escort.

"Hey," Nick said, his smile even bigger than it had been when he was talking to me.

"Park will be opening in fifteen. Got any questions?" Sean asked.

Nick and I shook our heads. Whitney just sighed.

"Okay then. To start with, a couple of you help the kids climb into a tube at the top, one

catches 'em if they spill over at the bottom. Think you can handle it?"

Was that a serious question?

I nodded. "Yeah, of course."

"Okay then."

"Okay then" seemed to be all he could think to say to signal that we were good to go. I wondered if he was as nervous about being my supervisor as I was about having him as my supervisor.

"So, Nick, why don't you start out at the bottom of the slide?" Sean suggested. "Every fifteen minutes we'll rotate positions so no one falls asleep. Then we've got what we call rotators who'll come through and relieve you for break and lunch."

"Awesome," Nick said, before hopping on the slide and riding down to the bottom, fake-screaming like he was terrified.

I laughed. Sean cleared his throat. I stopped laughing. This was serious business. For a minute, I'd gotten caught up in the fun and forgotten.

"Hey, Nick, we're not supposed to actually play on the slides," Sean called out.

“I wasn’t playing, dude,” Nick said. “I was transporting.”

“Yeah, right,” Sean grumbled. He looked at me and Whitney. “Okay then, if you’ve got no questions, I’ve got other areas to watch, employees to supervise, so I’ll check back later.”

He waited a second to see if we had questions. We didn’t. Then he walked away.

As soon as he was out of sight, Whitney sat down on the edge of the pool, near the slide. She waved at Nick. He waved back. Then she put her arms behind her, leaned back, and began kicking her feet in the water, creating little splashes.

It seemed like if we were going to work together that we should at least be friendly — like lab partners at school. It was easier to work with someone you knew. Not easier if he was your supervisor, but easier if you were equals. And Whitney and I were equals, working in the same position. Who knew? Maybe we could even be friends.

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